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Performing young womanhood in neoliberal Britain:  
Discursive constructions of new femininities

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psychology

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## Abstract

This thesis explores how young women negotiate the meanings and dilemmas of young womanhood in Britain today. Gender, womanhood and young adulthood have been variably defined and understood. This thesis will investigate how young women negotiate contemporary discursive constructions of femininity, taking a broadly social constructionist and discursive psychological perspective which conceptualises identities as constructed and continually negotiated in talk and interactions. The thesis analyses data from 13 semi-structured interviews with 8 female university students between the ages of 18 and 23. In addition, it analyses a data set of vlogs uploaded by 11 female vloggers in the same age group. In this thesis 'discourse' is used in the wider sense of denoting meaning-making practices such as visual images and appearance as well as spoken language. An innovative methodological framework for analysing video material is proposed. The thesis considers what kind of young woman is brought into being through the talk, appearances and other discursive practices of the participants. It shows how the participants negotiate complicated discursive contexts in which positioning oneself as empowered is desirable, and positioning oneself as a victim is undesirable. The thesis also shows how the participants position themselves as responsible in their talk about their futures.

The analysis shows the ambiguities in young women's orientations to their bodies, and the ways that young women position themselves as intelligent and mature by distancing themselves from vulnerability to beauty related pressures. The analysis also shows how young women continually work on improving themselves, reflecting not only on their self-improvements, but also on their ongoing reflexivity. Yet overdoing their careful controlling of themselves is constructed as unhealthy. The implications of these findings and the methods used are discussed.

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# **Chapter 1 Introduction**

## **1.1 The Research Aims**

This thesis analyses constructions around what it means to be a young woman today in Britain. As previous research has shown, issues surrounding notions of agency, appearance, choice and female empowerment are pertinent to young women's lives (Gill, 2007, 2012; Duits and van Zoonen, 2007; Lamb and Peterson, 2011; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011; Malson, Halliwell, Tischner and RÚDÓLFSDÓTTIR 2011; Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong and Seeley, 2014). This study investigates some of the complexities of these ideas: young women negotiate potentially contradictory demands to fulfil societal prescriptions for how young women 'should' look and simultaneously be 'empowered' and impervious to such social pressures. At the same time, it examines what possibilities are available, and to whom, when negotiating discourses that simultaneously posit that women can 'have it all', whilst constraining what 'all' that may be, and in particular, discouraging any position suggesting young women are anything other than empowered.

To investigate this, I analyse vlogs (short videos produced by young women, featuring themselves, and uploaded to YouTube) as well as interviews with young women. I analyse what the women's talk, and in the case of the vlogs, visual elements such as appearance, close-ups and other cinematographic techniques, shows about their engagement with such issues, what possibilities and difficulties arise from this engagement, and how these are negotiated.

The research takes a qualitative approach based on social constructionism (Gergen, 1999), critical discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998; Edley, 2001) and narrative analysis in psychology (Taylor and Littleton, 2006; Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor, 2007) and considers subjectivity to be constituted in social practices and language (Taylor, 2015). As will be discussed in more detail in section 1.4 below and in chapter 4, in this thesis ‘discourse’ is used in the wider sense of denoting meaning-making practices such as visual images and appearance as well as spoken language.

The study goes beyond the debates over ‘empowerment’ and ‘sexualisation’ that currently dominate research on young women by investigating the possibilities and constraints arising for young women from the availability of post-feminist discourses of empowered and sexy young women. It considers which possible ways of doing contemporary femininity are encouraged and enabled in different social contexts, and which possibilities are opened up or closed down by the discourses women draw upon. Furthermore, drawing on data from interviews and from online vlogs, the research extends current methods of discourse analysis to enable analysis of visual data in the form of online vlogs. This recognises the importance now of cyberspace, or online life, in young women’s lives.

In section 1.2 of this opening chapter, I briefly outline current media representations of young women as having achieved equality, and how researchers have approached issues affecting young women today. This includes McRobbie’s (2015) discussion of how young women are encouraged to achieve perfection, while others have investigated what they see as increased sexualisation of young women. Sexualisation has often been engaged with in terms of agency, empowerment and choice, but in this section I argue for a broader focus that pays attention to the wider societal contexts within which agency and choice are enacted. This section furthermore introduces arguments that

young women are discouraged from positioning themselves as victims. Section 1.3 outlines research suggesting class interacts with gendered norms. Young women can be seen as navigating currently appropriate ways of performing femininity, but what is considered appropriate varies with women's class position. Class may then become a discursive tool for judging and evaluating women which makes it pertinent to pay attention to how class is discursively worked up in people's talk. In section 1.4, I outline the social constructionist and discursive approach adopted in this thesis, and define how I understand subjectivity. I also briefly define how I use the terms 'discourse' and 'neoliberalism'. Finally, section 1.5 is an overview of the remaining chapters in the thesis.

## **1.2 Current Representations of Young Women**

In the media today, women are often represented as having achieved empowerment and gender-equality, but there is also a marked re-sexualisation of women's bodies, exemplified by what some writers refer to as 'raunch' culture and 'porno-chic' (e.g. Evans, Riley and Shankar, 2010). Some writers suggest that the two representations are connected so that an appearance of women's empowerment is shown as enacted through a sexy body (Gill, 2008a; Malson, Halliwell, Tischner, and Rudolfsdottir, 2011; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Angela McRobbie suggests that in the last decade, government and media discourses more generally have attributed women with capacity, simultaneously hailing them as the successful ideal subjects of neoliberal culture (McRobbie, 2008a), and urging them to become "hyper-active across three key sites" (McRobbie, 2007, p 718): to manifest their new visibility in the fashion and beauty systems of consumer culture, as "phallic girls" enjoying sexual freedoms, and also as "Top Girls" in the fields of education and employment.

The contemporary context for young women has been a particular focus of Angela McRobbie's. In a 2015 article, she outlined how there appears to be increasing control of young women, as the idea of perfection is held up as the ideal young women should aspire to achieve through self-regulation. McRobbie defines 'the perfect' as follows:

“There is of course the idea of career success. The perfect relies, however, most fully on restoring traditional femininity, which means that female competition is inscribed within specific horizons of value relating to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, family and home, motherhood and maternity. Reduced to journalistic clichés, this comes to be known as ‘having it all’. The perfect thus comes to stand for the relationship between successful domesticity and successful sexuality. The extent to which feminism of sorts has entered into this terrain is marked by the seeming seriousness with which such a goal is to be pursued.... (p.7)

In the present context lifestyle choices appear to be held up as free choices for individuals, while the choices women ought to make to achieve particular outcomes may be seen as heavily prescribed. McRobbie talks of 'the perfect' as a "...more hard-edged version of masquerade, one where the awareness of female subjugation ... is compounded, not by a repudiation of feminism but instead by its translation into an inner drive, a determination to meet a set of self-directed goals..." (p. 12) In other words, in the present context, feminism is not dismissed as irrelevant, but has been taken into account and incorporated into prescribed ideals for young women, as individual ambition and a drive to become successful, which is conceptualised as desirable personal characteristics for young women. McRobbie suggests further that the white western idea of imperfection is in close proximity to 'the perfect'. She uses the example of the young actor Lena Dunham and the character she has created in the HBO series 'Girls' and suggests this character, Hannah Horvath, and Hannah's friends are

offered as “inherently imperfect and thus not only ‘real’ but also ‘endearing’” (p. 13) as they are shown as questioning requirements and expectations of young women to, for example, be slim and beautiful. McRobbie suggests that Dunham can afford to present herself as imperfect, both as her character in the TV show and in her blogs, in this stage of life with her arguably privileged white, relatively affluent background. This raises questions of whether some women can afford not to appear driven at this age while others cannot, and what form such ‘drivenness’ takes for young women.

Other approaches to young women in research engage with questions of their perceived ‘sexualisation’ and approach this in terms of ‘agency’, ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’. In some research (e.g. Lamb and Peterson, 2011; Duits and van Zoonen, 2006), young women’s alleged ‘empowerment’ and ‘agency’ are discussed in terms of localised, situational contexts, such as choices relating to sex acts, sexiness and dress. However, such research on women’s ‘agency’, ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ risks reducing the importance of these phenomena to situations involving decisions over how to dress and decisions relating to sex acts, while ‘agency’, ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ are relevant to all aspects of young women’s lives. Furthermore, without sufficient regard to wider contexts within which these concepts are situated and constituted, such debates over ‘empowerment’ may be seen as derailing debates over wider social and cultural issues pertaining to possibilities for young women. Some researchers seem to assume that a demonstrable presence of ‘agency’ renders cultural influences irrelevant, as if showing how women act agentially in given situations means, in and of itself, that these agentic actions negate external influences, and are in and of themselves empowering by virtue of having been performed agentially (for example Duits and van Zoonen, 2006; Akass and McCabe (2004) see also Gill and Donaghue, 2013).

Throughout this thesis, I take the view that notions of ‘empowerment’, ‘sexualisation’, ‘agency’ and ‘choice’, are not best seen as isolated concepts that are either present or not, but rather are best understood as phenomena that are all constituted and enacted in particular historical and cultural contexts and also constitute discursive resources that people may draw on, and as such are relevant to all aspects of young women’s lives. Debates over whether particular acts should be interpreted as agentic seem too narrow if they do not consider the wider social contexts making some acts and choices available and desirable, and not others.

Similarly, the representation of young women as successful and hyper visible across the sites outlined by McRobbie above may be considered part of a cultural and discursive context that impacts on both possibilities and constraints for young women. From the discursive perspective used here, the notion of young women as top educational performers, successful in employment, enjoying sexual freedoms and as active consumers of beauty and fashion is viewed as a representation of young womanhood that young women may draw on as discursive and cultural resources in defining themselves and western young women in general.

Other representations influencing possibilities and constraints for young women are media representations of ideal female appearance. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, Malson et al. (2011) analysed how 18-21-year-old women interpreted what Gill terms ‘midriff’ advertising. The ‘midriff’ is “a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for’ sex” (Gill, 2008b, p. 437). Malson et al. found that participants used “feminist-like” arguments to “critique post-feminist images of women” (Malson et al, 2011, p 96), by construing the empowerment ostensibly portrayed by these images as illusory. However, they also found that participants simultaneously recognised the appeal of such

images, whereby “the midriff” is construed as both something to aspire to and critically distance oneself from. This indicates that young women are drawing on discourses suggesting that they should look a certain way, but also position themselves in their talk as someone who is not influenced by media representations of young women.

Gill (2012) also found in her research with younger girls that awareness of media practices and representations of women did not allow the girls to circumvent beauty ideals, but rather seemed to place them in a double bind of having to simultaneously reject and live up to them. This starts to illustrate something of the conflicting discourses that women and girls draw on, requiring them to both dismiss and live up to beauty ideals. Part of the aim of this research is to explicate how women negotiate this double bind.

This negotiation is made more complex by contemporary conditions where it seems appearance may be a matter of increasing importance. McRobbie (2015) argues that Facebook and other social media may be the modern-day equivalent of the beauty pageant. She argues that “...a key issue for feminism would be to attempt to understand the consequences for girls and young women of this heightened visibility which they themselves so actively promulgate.” (p.6) Such active promulgation of visibility is interesting in relation to other online media such as vlogs as well as what women post to Facebook. When McRobbie likens social media today to beauty pageants, this suggests that the new visibility is a problematic development. However, McRobbie does not distinguish between ‘visibility’ and being ‘on display’ and while issues may arise in connection with young women being on display, young women being seen and heard may not necessarily be problematic. The difference between visibility and being on display, and the effects of both, require exploration and the analysis here of how women

talk about pictures posted to Facebook and how young women present themselves in vlogs will start doing this. Online media may give women a place to speak, to each other and to the world more generally, while also giving them some control over how they present themselves. Online social media can in this way be seen to afford young women visibility in a way that is more under their own control than representations of young women usually are. However, as social media such as Facebook and vlogs are still situated in the cultural space of the world outside cyberspace, when women present themselves online they are also displaying themselves within existing norms and ideals for how young women should appear. When making use of the visibility made available through social media, users also lay themselves open to scrutiny and comments on how they look, speak and what they say.

Another concept which is often referred to in research on (young) women is ‘victim’. Joanne Baker (2010) outlines how some writers (such as Wolf, 1994, cited in Baker, 2010) have taken issue with feminism for allegedly encouraging women to see themselves as ‘victims’. However, Baker found in her own research with women negotiating difficult circumstances, that these young women avoided identities as ‘victims’ by denying constraints. It thus appears that while young women are now attributed with capacity, talk of structural inequalities and disadvantage has become taboo in efforts to avoid ‘victimhood’.

As Carine M Mardorossian (2014) discusses, an impression of “victims” as inagentic, non-choosing, vulnerable and dependent is emerging, while these same terms are simultaneously construed as self-evidently undesirable. This is very clearly illustrated in this sub-heading from SlutWalk London!’s home page (<http://slutmeansspeakup.org.uk/>) : “We are not victims. We were victims, for a moment in time. Now, we are survivors.”



‘Victim’ status is rejected in favour of a status as ‘survivor’ which, in this context, brings to mind a stronger and more agentic person.

This suggests that as women are, in Rosalind Gill’s words, “invited to purchase anything from bras to coffee as signs of their power and independence (from men)” (Gill, 2008a, p 38), young women are also now encouraged to perform femininity in ways recognisably associated with strong women. However, this raises a question of whether a performance as ‘a strong woman’ is equally available to all women, and whether a performance of such an identity is interpreted in the same way regardless of who does it, and regardless of the appearance of the woman doing it. As I will consider in the next section, class may intersect with gender in making some performances of femininity more readily available to some women than others.

Young women today appear to negotiate complicated discursive contexts making the positioning of oneself as empowered desirable, while positioning oneself as a victim is undesirable. However, it is clearly not up to individual women alone to pick and choose which versions of femininity to adopt: people are also already positioned by others, in ways selves may not control (Davies and Harré, 1990).

Adding a desirability of avoiding victimhood to the double bind of simultaneously dismissing and living up to beauty ideals, it appears that current social and cultural conditions can be seen to require young women to navigate a *triple* bind, between a demand to resist social pressures, a demand to be ‘sexy’ *and* a demand to avoid victimhood. In sum, this thesis presents an analysis of how young women negotiate potentially contradictory demands to be simultaneously ‘sexy’ and ‘empowered’ while

appearing to not be influenced by external pressures. It also considers, which possibilities are available to whom when negotiating discourses that simultaneously posit that women can 'have it all' and discourage 'victim' positions.

### **1.3 Gender and Class**

Beverley Skeggs (2005) argues that working class women are more readily pathologised than middle class women. Working class women are often interpreted as doing femininity wrongly, for example by being seen as wearing too much or too little make-up or being seen as vulgar by being 'too sexy'. In a study of 'hooking-up' culture at a US college campus (defined by the authors as "casual sexual activity on college campuses" (p. 589)), Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) found that class interacted with gender norms in the young women's approaches to sexual 'exploration' and relationships. Middle and upper class women cited 'self-development' discourses, emphasising the undesirability of committed relationships at this time of life, in their talk about engaging in 'hooking-up' culture. Working class students, in contrast, often spoke of wanting to get married while still at college and of finding 'hooking up' culture immature or foreign. All groups of students, however, worried about being labelled 'promiscuous'. This echoes findings by Emily Bishop (2012) that older gender norms like the sexual double standard still exist, whereby casual sex is acceptable for men but overt or frequent casual sexual behaviour is unacceptable for women. The continuing impact of these norms appears to influence young women's engagements with 'raunch culture', whereby young women still worry about gaining a reputation as a 'slut'.

Young women today may be understood as navigating currently appropriate ways of performing femininity, whereby they are expected to be sexually attractive and sexually active while, simultaneously, excessive attention to appearance is read as immoral and

in vulgar taste (Skeggs, 2001). It is important to consider Beverley Skeggs' analyses (e.g. 2001, 2005) of how 'excessive', or 'pathological', femininity has historically been associated with working class women, in contrast to the 'good taste' of middle class feminine appearance. Skeggs (2001) furthermore argues that femininity is one form of cultural capital that working-class women have access to, but when used by working class women it is often interpreted as pathological, in contrast to an idealised version of middle class femininity. This suggests it would be useful to consider how different forms of capital can be used by women in performances of femininity, and highlights a need to consider gender and its intersections with class as they are constituted in peoples lived everyday experiences, and to consider how class is discursively worked up, and becomes a discursive tool for judging and evaluating women (as too little and/or too much). Rather than imposing simplistic class-categorisations onto the participants and vloggers in this study I consider how class is worked up and the function of working up class in the talk of participants.

## **1.4 Social Constructionist and Discursive Approaches to Subjectivity**

In this thesis, I employ the wider poststructuralist notion of discourse that includes meaning-making through body language, visual images and other signifying practices as well as language (Fairclough, 2001). The research is grounded in critical discursive psychology which often uses 'interpretative repertoires' to denote "relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world" (Edley, 2001, p198) which is very similar to what many researchers mean when they use the concept 'discourse'. Both concepts of 'discourse' and 'interpretative repertoires' are interested in repositories of meaning and their ties to ideology. The distinction between the concepts sometimes denotes ringfencing of disciplines between more strongly Foucauldian work and critical discursive psychology that places higher emphasis on agency in deployment

of language (Edley, 2001, p202). However, the reason I chose the term discourse here is that it more readily encompasses the analyses of visual aspects of communication beyond that of spoken language. As I consider appearance, body language and video-techniques such as editing and framing of shots in vlogs to be communicative practices that should be included in analysis, this wider conceptualisation of discourse is appropriate.

Another concept that needs clarifying up front is subjectivity. In this thesis subjectivity is conceptualised in discursive terms, which means that the subject is seen as constituted in language and other meaningful discursive practices, rather than intra-psychically as held by some more psychoanalytically inspired approaches (e.g. Hollway in Henriques et al. 1984).

Foucault argued that “discourse constructs the topic” (Hall, 2001, p.72) and thereby defines and produces objects of knowledge. As the social constructionist, and specifically Foucauldian, approaches to meaning entail that knowledges about things presume those things have meaning, meanings that in turn are produced through discourse, knowledges are produced in discourse. Subjects then come to understand themselves within such regimes of knowledges. Indeed, it is discourse that produces and represents subjects, not subjects that produce or author discourse, representations and knowledge. For example, ‘young women’ as subjects are produced via discourses constructing what it means to be ‘young’ a ‘woman’ and ‘young woman’ which in the discourses producing ‘young woman’ as a meaningful subject will be more than, and different to, a simple combination of discourses around the separate subjects of ‘young’ and ‘woman’. Of course, ‘young woman’ should not be seen as a rigid and stable category that will mean the same to everyone using the term, or indeed be considered to represent the totality of a given young woman’s subjectivity. On the contrary, this thesis

analyses which subjects are brought into being and which meanings are made relevant in young women's talk, through the discourses available to the speakers.

The Foucauldian approach has been critiqued for leaving very little room for subjectivity and underspecifying how subjectivity is produced (e.g. Henriques et al. 1984), but researchers working within the discursive tradition have since focussed more specifically on this question. Margaret Wetherell (2003, 2007) introduced the concept of 'personal order' (discussed further in Chapter 4) to explicate how modes of practice build up over time to shape how people go on in the world. That is, meaningful practices learned and practiced over the course of a life come to shape and guide people's practices. Other researchers working within this tradition have analysed more specifically how discursive resources shape how people think and talk about themselves and others, in other words, the subjectivities constituted through these resources, as well as considered the implications and limitations such discursive practices produce (e.g. Taylor, 2015; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Taylor and Littleton 2006; 2012; McAvoy, 2009, 2015).

Consequently, in this thesis, I consider what kind of person is brought into being through the discursive practices, that is, the speech, appearances and other practices of young women. Here I consider the demands and limitations placed on young women in McRobbie's view outlined above, as well as other issues such as sexualisation, to be a part of discursive resources available to young women. The questions of how knowingly and reflexively young women draw on discourses from media and other influences is here considered an empirical question. I am therefore neither alleging that young women are social dupes being moulded unknowingly and uncritically by societal demands, nor am I alleging that they stand outside social influences reflexively evaluating all the discursive practices influencing their lives and selves. Indeed, the

question of the extent to which people are social dupes or reflexive critics of the social world is itself here also considered a discursive resource that people may draw upon. It is worth noting that presently higher value is attached to positioning oneself as reflexively critical than positioning oneself as influenced by societal ideas understood to be external to the person (Gill, 2008b). It is possible that this distinction and the values attached to it is a particular product of the ‘neoliberal’ present.

This concept of the ‘neoliberal present’ is also one which needs some introduction for this thesis. ‘Neoliberal’ is an increasingly widely used term and it is not always clear what is meant by it. For that reason, I largely avoid using the term except when citing others, but when the term is used it is as a shorthand to encompass a present time characterised by increased individualism, where individuals are considered simultaneously individually responsible for their own lives and usually considered, in principle at least, capable of this, as opposed to a time past imagined as more collectivist in outlook. Neoliberal also signifies a present increasingly governed by market forces, where the logic of the market has come to dominate prevailing modes of thinking (Rose, 1998; Miller and Rose, 2008). ‘Neoliberal’ is often used in opposition to welfare states, or to describe societies where a previously existing welfare state is in decline, as primary responsibility for individuals is no longer considered the remit of the state (e.g. McDowell, 2014). Depending on the background of the author using the term it may refer to more or less specific economic policies and conditions and sometimes it is used to encompass subjectifications of people and how subjects are governed within such societies. However, as this thesis is not an analysis of neoliberalism *per se*, and as the term is variably used, I prefer to state more specifically which aspects of neoliberalism I mean whenever aspects of it are relevant.

## 1.5 Overview of the Thesis

In Chapter 2, I review relevant literature about gender and youth. Gender has been approached and conceptualised in many different ways and I had to make some arbitrary decisions about how to approach this review. I outline various conceptualisations: biological definitions largely corresponding to sex, approaches viewing gender as classed structure, poststructuralist approaches, especially Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) contribution conceptualising gender as performativity and also the more recent view of gender as a feeling of gender identity. This chapter furthermore considers relevant contemporary theoretical discussions within feminism around what the most pertinent issues surrounding gender are.

The second half of the chapter considers how the category 'youth' has similarly been variably approached, as either a developmental stage or a generation. The chapter considers critiques of both models while also reviewing research indicating that both approaches inform how 'youth' is conceptualised at the moment, and contribute to a current view that today's youth is stuck in a prolonged adolescence as they are unable to achieve traditional markers of adulthood. While there is thus no clear consensus around the meanings of either 'youth' or 'gender', I argue that all conceptualisations form part of discursive resources available to people when talking about and performing youth and gender and constitute youth and gender in particular situated ways. I complete this chapter by outlining my research questions.

In Chapter 3 I turn to theorisations of the present, by outlining first Anthony Giddens' (1991) analysis of what he terms late modernity, before outlining Nikolas Rose's (1990, 2008) analysis of liberal democracies and a brief outline of discursive approaches to identity. Giddens' characterization of life in late modernity describes ideas around individualisation, choice and personal responsibility for forging individual biographies

in contrast with how he sees earlier modes of living as more strongly dominated by tradition, while Rose offers a more totalizing account of governmentality in which individuals are seen as shaped into particular types of subjects. The discursive accounts of, for example, Stephanie Taylor (2015) and Jill Reynolds, Margaret Wetherell and Stephanie Taylor (2007) represent a theoretical orientation to the present in between the autonomy argued by Giddens and top-down governance described by Rose.

Giddens' ideas emphasizing choice and individual possibilities, although critiqued as not equally applicable to everyone and overlooking other societal contexts and constraints, are important as 'choice' and 'agency' are key concepts within discursive resources available to and drawn on by people in the present. While Rose arguably gives a more complex account of how particular subjects come into being in the present context, I adopt the discursive approach viewing choice, personal responsibility and ability to shape biographies within present governmental technologies as part of complex discursive resources within which people are both governed and reflexive.

In the second half of this chapter I turn to empirical studies and theory concerned specifically with young women in the current context. Both theory and empirical research has dealt extensively with issues around sexualisation, agency and the concept of 'empowerment'. Furthermore, I look at how the concept of 'victimhood' and the suggestion that young women are avoiding positioning themselves as victims, is receiving attention both empirically, especially by Joanne Baker (2010), and theoretically by writers such as Carine M Mardorossian (2014). These writers both consider how avoiding victimhood closes down possibilities for naming difficulties and constraints while equating victimhood with passivity and lack of agency. From the theoretical analyses and empirical findings regarding how young women negotiate



engagements with beauty practices, with current constructions of the value of individual choice and with agency, emerges a picture of potentially contradictory demands on young women to simultaneously live up to beauty ideals, disavow influence by societal pressures, disavow constraints and live up to expectations of success across the sites of education and employment.

In Chapter 4 I move on to considering methodology. I begin by outlining the discursive psychosocial approach to the subject and subjectivity adopted in this thesis whereby the subject is viewed as constituted in social contexts through pre-existing and ever-changing meanings. Discourse analysis has sometimes been critiqued for not being useful for analysing phenomena beyond talk and text. This critique is bound up with the ‘turn to affect’ and through considering the alleged shortcomings of discourse analysis by this turn, I consider ways in which discursive methods are developing and expanding to enable analyses of wider phenomena beyond language. In doing so, I firstly consider the argument that the meanings of many phenomena considered outside the reach of discourse analysis, such as meanings of being embodied, are negotiated and engaged with through language. However, I also consider how analysts may apply discursive methods for analysing phenomena such as appearance, bodily movements and actions. The last section of Chapter 4 is a discussion of the analysis of vlogs. The narrative - discursive method developed by Taylor and Littleton (2006) was extended by Tracy Morison and Catriona Macleod (2013) into what they termed a performative-performance analytical approach in order to develop an analytical framework for Butler’s notion of performativity of gender. I suggest it can be further extended to enable discursive analysis of visual material like vlogs.

While Chapter 4 attends to the methodological underpinnings of this thesis, Chapter 5 describes the method used. I consider why interviews and vlogs were considered the most suitable, while explaining why and how I interviewed women across different locations; I conducted up to three interviews with university students aged between 18 and 23, the first a walking interview around their university campus, the second usually online over Skype which included a look at pictures they had posted to Facebook, and the third face-to-face in a public location away from university. This chapter discusses the rationale for using interviews, the rationale for using vlogs and the selection criteria for the vlogs. The last sections of Chapter 5 outline how I approached analysis of the interviews and how I approached description and analysis of the vlogs.

The next three chapters, 6, 7 and 8, present my findings. In Chapter 6, “Ambiguities in talk about the body”, I analyse how young women orient to their bodies in their talk. Although ‘sexualisation’ and ‘objectification’ feature prominently in the literature concerning young women, the way young women talked about bodies and body image makes these foci appear too narrow. Instead, I found Connell’s term ‘emphasized femininity’ to be more useful for analysing young women’s engagements with bodily practices. However, while Connell uses the term to refer to “femininity oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (1987, in Dilley et. al. 2014 p.144) in this thesis, the term ‘emphasized femininity’ is taken to refer to culturally sanctioned and understood desirable femininity as this enables better capture of what young women are doing and saying about bodies and beauty expectations.

In this analysis, young women orient to perceived pressures and expectations in complicated ways that involve both constructing influences from external beauty related pressures as vulnerability, which they distance themselves from, and simultaneously

living up to at least some expectations of what young women should look like. Talk about bodies and expectations was bound up with critiques of societal pressures but also entangled with positionings of the speaker as strong and agentic in resisting such pressures, even as they also demonstrated meeting some of these expectations at least on occasion. Furthermore, in some women's talk, inconsistencies in repudiating the idea that appearance matters became a troubled position, indicating that even as some women navigate demands to both repudiate and live up to societal expectations regarding appearance by emphasising femininity only on occasion, this way of navigating multiple demands may not always work. When appearance and spoken claims do not appear to cohere, a speaker's position may become troubled. Conversely, there were examples in the vlog material of the reverse, whereby a vlogger could navigate a complex terrain of repudiating societal pressures while arguably living up to them, by critiquing appearance related pressures on young women in speech while meeting required standards visually.

The findings presented in this chapter suggest that culturally sanctioned and understood desirable femininity is not a constant, a precisely correct look that will always be just right. Rather, any given appearance may lead to troubled positions if the woman can be read as inconsistent when aspects of her performances of femininity in speech, actions and appearance are not seen to cohere. Conversely, one way of negotiating conflicting demands can also be performance of disparate aspects of femininity that may seem contradictory, such as adhering to beauty standards in appearance while verbally dismissing them.

Chapter 7 explores 'The qualities of the 'Ideal Young Woman''. As some qualities emerged as unquestionably desirable while others were treated as undesirable, strong

patterns emerged from the data constructing the qualities of the ideal young woman. The women's talk treated it as self-evident that confidence is desirable but, crucially, not too much confidence. Similarly, the ideal young woman works to improve herself but again takes care not to overdo the self-improvements. She even takes care to control her own mental health while also taking care not to overdo her own controlling of herself. In this the findings echo McRobbie's (2015) argument that young women are called upon to become successful, but not too successful, in order not to become a challenge to men. However, these data suggest that, where McRobbie's argument was mostly in relation to education and career success, young women control themselves across many more aspects of their lives, such as taking care to be confident while not too confident, and they also take on responsibility for controlling their control of themselves as too much control is seen as harmful. This indicates a very reflexive young female subject who is constantly engaged in monitoring herself.

Chapter 8 turns the focus to young women's constructions of their futures. I have titled this chapter 'Analysis of Responsible Planning' as the women take great responsibility for planning responsible futures for themselves. One important aspect is financial independence. As the speakers outline their plans and hopes for achieving financial independence they position themselves as responsible young women. Furthermore, most of the speakers outlined plans for when they would have children while they emphasised the importance of choosing the right partner with whom to have them.

These data suggest that young women have a very clear idea of what they consider to be expected of them. It was noticeable that almost all the participants referred to future heterosexual marriage relationships. Furthermore, there was a strong theme that young women assume a responsibility for forging adult lives that include children, whom they

consider themselves mostly responsible for as mothers; husbands, whom they are responsible for choosing carefully; and careers and incomes that will ensure financial independence. These findings counter views of young adulthood as a time free from adult responsibilities as these young women, while not having those responsibilities yet, are assuming responsibility for getting them. Furthermore, the women's talk constructs a future in which it is not only possible for women to 'have it all' (when having it all is assumed to mean careers, husbands and children), but a responsibility of women to ensure, through careful and responsible planning, that they do achieve this. Some women spoke of wishing for something more, but as they could not name what this would be, it appears that they did not have discursive resources for imagining something outside the traditional elements of careers and families.

Chapter 9 is my conclusion where I summarise the findings and contributions to the field of this research. I start the chapter by reviewing the contribution of an innovative methodological framework for analysing video material. I discuss the implications of women's linking of repudiation of external pressures in relation to bodies and beauty with personal strength and maturity. I also further review the implications of young women's constructions of ideal young women as fully responsible for their own lives, futures and welfare, including their own mental health. I likewise consider how the perpetual reflections on self-improvements and controlling of the self indicate that there will never be a 'just right' amount of desire for self-improvement or self reflections; that indeed an ideal way for young women to be does not exist.

Following Chapter 9 are the references and following these the appendices.

## **Chapter 2 A gendered and youthful subject**

### **2.1 Introduction**

While both the terms ‘gender’ and ‘youth’ are often used as if they were simple and generally understood, the meanings of these categories are neither fixed nor stable. This chapter explores changes in how ‘gender’ have been conceptualized and looks at how ‘youth’ as a category has been approached, which includes looking at what researchers have argued to be the more pertinent problems for both ‘gender’ and ‘youth’ as categories. This chapter is thus mainly a look at theoretical approaches, while more empirical studies will be reviewed in Chapter 3.

I start by looking into how ‘gender’ has been conceptualized and explained by academics and feminists and reviewing the contemporary state of discussions around gender. This includes outlining positions understanding ‘gender’ as a class in a structural system of patriarchy, as performativity, that is, as something people do, rather than something they are, and approaches conceptualizing gender as a subjective feeling of ‘gender identity’.

As ‘gender’ is increasingly studied as a subject beyond explaining differences between men and women with reference to biology, the term ‘gender’ has tended to replace the term ‘sex’. However, this is not to say that debates over the meanings and impacts of the biological body have disappeared from studies of ‘gender’ or discussion of gender related issues both inside and outside the academy.

The story of gender is of course impossible to pin down, to tell the one true version, so what follows will be somewhat like a whistle-stop tour of highlights in the history of approaches to ‘gender’ that are of particular relevance to my study, and that give the necessary background to what follows. This will include an outline of how the conceptualisations of gender are linked to different waves of feminism. I am, however,

aware that even telling the story this way involves simplification, as conceptualisations of gender have never been fixed, uniform or homogenous.

The waves of feminism are likewise difficult to define. In the sections below I describe in more detail the inputs from the second and third waves that are of specific relevance to this thesis, but it is useful to have initial loose definitions. The first wave, although not discussed here, denotes the late nineteenth and early twentieth century women's movements, especially in the UK and US, concerned with suffrage (Rampton, 2015). The second wave began in the 1960s and is usually assumed to have continued into the 1980s or early 1990s. The second wave was increasingly radical and drew attention to women's experiences in the home and in the workplace and advocated for sexual freedoms and questioned prevailing ideas of what it means to be a woman (Rampton, 2015; Hannam, 2007). The third wave is usually assumed to have begun in the 1990s, and there is some debate over whether it continues today or whether there is currently a fourth wave. The third wave is influenced by postmodern thinking and destabilized and deconstructed notion of a universal womanhood while also embracing practices previously viewed as repressive objectification (Rampton, 2015). The third wave will be discussed more fully in section 2.3.7 as this wave is particularly pertinent to this thesis. The possible fourth wave is described by Rampton (2015) as, although still a silhouette, a feminism that is moving from academia into public discourse more broadly. It may be understood as simultaneously concerned with gendered inequality, but also with gendering, where the fourth wave questions binary understandings of gender. However, there is as yet no clear agreement over whether there is a fourth wave, and if so, what marks it out as different from the third.

In section 2.3 I move onto the category of 'youth', reviewing how it has been variably viewed as a generation or a developmental stage and how these conceptualizations and definitions have been critiqued, by reviewing theory and empirical research findings.

While both approaches have been critiqued for either generalizing across a generation or, in the life stage model, viewing youth out of historical context, both are discussed here because they inform how youth is currently understood as stuck in a prolonged adolescence, unable to achieve full adulthood.

There is not a clear consensus around what is meant by either ‘gender’ or ‘youth’ but the tensions around the meanings of both are pertinent to this research, not least as the various ways of understanding both gender and youth can be seen as discursive resources available to people, including my research participants. While some conceptualizations may be newer than others, and sometimes be assumed to have superseded earlier ideas, there is potential for people to draw on parts of all these ideas in their talk.

## **2.2 Changing approaches to sex and gender**

The sex-gender distinction may be seen as an early feminist challenge to a biologicistic view of women and men’s roles in society, that is, as nurturers and breadwinners.

However, as ‘gender’ came to be understood in social terms, it also became a somewhat complex term. The sociologist Harriet Bradley (2013) defines gender in three ways. She argues that gender is firstly a categorical term, used by human beings as a way of dividing up the world around them and making sense of it, thus meaning gender is socially constructed. Secondly, gender is political, as it concerns power relations between women and men. Thirdly, gender is lived experience. Although a social construct “it refers to aspects of our lives that are all too real” (p.5) whereby gender has very real implications for people’s lives. She highlights how ‘gender’ is used not only as a categorical term to denote female, male and their associated roles, but also very often in a contest for gender equality. The term has thus often been politically deployed and gained traction during the 1970s and second wave feminism. The idea of gender simultaneously having several meanings or definitions, and the concept being deployed



to do different things is useful, even as the uses and the list of things to include in the definition will be open to debate and likely continue to be in flux.

### **2.2.1 Biology**

As Alexandra Rutherford and Michael Pettit (2015) argue

“The psychology of women has always been a public science, one that has never been easily contained within academic or disciplinary limits. In contrast to the image of the mid-century social and cognitive sciences constituting themselves as a ‘closed world’ (Edwards, 1996), the psychology of women has long been open to a host of claimants.” (p. 231)

It has been argued, that women were initially missing from and in psychology, as psychology was the story of men (Rutherford and Pettit, 2015). When women were included, studies often concerned biological and psychological differences between men and women, often with the aim of explaining why women differ from the men who were taken to represent the norm (e.g. Broverman et al., 1970, in Hollway et al., 2002). Studies thus looked at differences in IQ, different strengths and differences in attitudes to sex and sexual behaviours. Often these studies and their findings were used to justify and explain why men and women were best suited to perform different roles in society, notably as breadwinners and nurturers (Fine, 2010).

Biology is still sometimes referred to, for example, to explain an alleged crisis of masculinity and underachievement of boys. Cecilie Nørgaard (2015) asserts that myths that boys are not biologically suited to modern education practices because they need to run around and be allowed to be ‘boisterous’ rather than be forced to sit still, abound in education. Interestingly, as Nørgaard points out, this is a reversal of the arguments used 100 years ago, for why girls were not suited to education, but back then girls’ lack of concentration and intellectual abilities were used to exclude them from subjects such as

math. Now the biological argument is used to accuse institutions of having become too 'feminised'. Outside academia old biological arguments alleging a more caring, nurturing nature of women still abound and are used to justify the unequal burden of caring carried by women (Stoller, 1990; Walker, Pratt and Eddy, 1995)

In 2010, Cordelia Fine debunked the idea that women's and men's brains are differently 'wired'. While I shall not go into details of the various myths debunked here, it is interesting that the book was needed at all at this time. More generally, it is easy to become a little suspicious of a resurgence of biological explanations for why women and men are not equal when these explanations are put forward and taken up by wider society at a time of increasing educational success of girls and women and advances of women in the labour market.

### **2.2.2. Gender as Class**

During the 1960s feminists challenged biology-as-destiny beliefs about women. Feminists also struggled to get women into paid work outside the home. In hindsight, the 60s and 70s can be seen as a period of economic upturn in the UK with little unemployment. Many more young people went to university, more young women aimed for careers rather than only marriage and many people explored 'alternative' lifestyles (e.g. hippies). Bradley (2013) points out that this was a time of mass protests, for example against the US war in Vietnam, and many people, especially young people, became engaged in movements "calling for greater democracy within and outwith the universities" (p. 38). She further argues that this "ferment" fed into academia, where radical approaches, especially Marxism, proliferated.

The Marxist focus on structures of exploitation became widespread throughout the social sciences during the 1960s and 70s. By the 1970s it was not unusual for women to do paid labour outside the home (although they arguably still did, and continue to do, most of the unpaid work in the home as well). Many Marxist feminists and much

research on gender focussed on where and how women were employed, as the employment market was gender segregated and women were paid less than men.

The intellectual context of concerns with equality and Marxist analyses of structural inequality could be seen as fertile ground for the application of Marxist theory to gender relations. Especially within sociology, Marxist feminists applied Marxist methods and concepts suggesting that the methods of historical materialism could be applied to household relations (Jackson, 2001). The focus on ‘the material’, for example women’s work and male violence (and distinguishing this from what some critics of postmodern turns to language call “a focus on ‘words’” (Barrett, 1992, in Jackson, 2001)), and the view of women as *a class* proliferated and continues to inform debates on gender.

Bradley (2013) argues that the belief that the world could be ‘known’ and understood went hand in hand with a belief that the world and societies are logically ordered and structured. It was believed and hoped that rational analysis and uncovering of these structures would accordingly bring about change.

### **2.2.3 Radical feminism**

A lasting contribution of radical feminism is the concept of patriarchy outlined in, for example, *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett, 1971. Patriarchy was viewed as an orderly set of structures, embedded in all society’s institutions as well as language, thought and ideas, through which men hold power over women and women’s contributions are belittled and devalued. In this view, gender becomes an organising principle of life, contrasting with a Marxist approach seeing class as the main organising principle under capitalism. Where Marxist feminists see ‘class’ as the primary source of inequality within these orderly systems and structures, radical feminists see ‘gender’ as primary. For radical feminists, patriarchy, that is, male oppression of women, predates any other form of oppression, and as such labour, labour power relations and the site of production is not the only focus for radical feminists, and they do not see waged labour

as the route to female liberation. However, both radical and Marxist feminists share a concern with analysing gender inequality in relations to, and in context of, capitalism.

In the 1970s it was frequently argued that sexual objectification was oppression, which is an argument that continually comes up and is debated in new contexts. Radical writers such as Andrea Dworkin and Germaine Greer helped put new topics such as domestic violence, rape, pornography and sexual objectification onto the agenda and inspired considerable activism (Greer, 1970; Dworkin, 1987, Bradley, 2013). Arguments surrounding objectification and sexualisation have come into conflict with arguments for women's rights to be sexual and, more recently, claims that choosing to sexualise oneself is empowering (this is a debate I will return to in Chapter 3)

In practice, of course, it is considerably more difficult to categorise types of feminisms than it may appear here. For example, activists and writers objecting to women being treated as sex-objects may 'fit' within each categorisation. The interest for this thesis is that the radical and Marxist feminisms associated with modernity and second wave feminism, and the conceptualisations of 'gender' that developed during this time, continue to have a major impact on the young women I am studying.

## **2.3 Postmodernist and Poststructuralist approaches to gender**

As I am tracing approaches to gender in the contexts of developments and changes in intellectual thinking and broader socio-political contexts, it is tempting to assume a progression where new modes of thinking neatly replace now outmoded approaches. However, neither academic 'turns' nor social, economic and political developments emerge so neatly. Indeed, such a view of developments now seems modernist, as postmodernists would dismiss a linear and progressive narrative of changes in thinking. For example, radical and Marxist feminist analyses of society and the role of gender in societal structures and institutions are by no means abandoned and are still influential.

In the following discussion, I use the Open Education Sociology Dictionary's definition of postmodernism which describes it as follows: "Postmodernism challenges the basic assumption of positivism, which is that society is ordered and can be empirically understood and measured" and "Postmodernism's underlying premise is that reality is social constructed."

I use the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language's definition of poststructuralism: "Any of various theories or methods of analysis, including deconstruction and some psychoanalytic theories, that deny the validity of structuralism's method of binary opposition and maintain that meanings and intellectual categories are shifting and unstable."

### **2.3.1 Poststructuralist influences**

The 1990s saw the beginning of an increasing concern with ontology and epistemology. Marxist influenced analyses of modernism had asserted that scientists were always on one side or another, that is, they would either reproduce the false ideas of the ruling elite or be on the side of uncovering the real knowledge of radical science; uncovering the hidden truths of exploitation. Postmodernism takes a different view of 'truths' and knowledge production (Wetherell, 2001). Postmodernism and poststructuralist thinking sees truths in relation to knowledge/power relations in a given historical time, for example what is taken as true in a strongly religious society will be different to what is seen as true in a secular one. For poststructuralism there cannot be one universal truth. This relativism of postmodern thinking changed what some researchers see themselves as doing, as many poststructuralist researchers do not see themselves as uncovering truths, in the way many modernist researchers do. While the focus of many areas of modernist research in the social sciences focussed on gender and class as organising principles from a positivist viewpoint, much poststructuralist research is arguably less

concerned with such structured organisation and more focussed on experiences and smaller narratives of specific groups (see for example Lyotard, 1984).

This follows a poststructuralist, particularly Foucauldian, view of power. Where modernists tended to see power as top-down power over people, men over women, ruling elites over working classes, poststructuralist views of power are more complex. Foucault's views of power differed from Marxist views in two ways. Firstly, he saw power as always linked with knowledge, in the sense that knowledge is not only a form of power, but "power is implicated in the question of whether and in what circumstances knowledge is to be applied or not" (Hall, 2001, p. 76). Thus, the main concern is not the 'truth' of knowledge, but the effects of the power/knowledge regime that penalises or rewards certain behaviours or ways of being. Consequently, the 'knowledge' of a time tends to have effects that makes what is held to be true come true! Secondly, Foucault did not conceptualise power as operating only and always top-down, but saw it as circulating all levels of existence, in capillary fashion, where power at lower levels of society are not "simple projections of central power" (Foucault, 1980 cited in Hall, 2001, p.77). He did thus not see power as necessarily repressive, but also as productive.

Gender theorists have also been influenced by the deconstructionism of Jacques Derrida (Shapiro, 2001; Barker and Scheele, 2016) in unpicking previously taken for granted 'truths' of rational, scientific thinking and unpicking traditional binary patterns (such as man/woman, nature/culture, feminine/masculine) and looking at such categories as continuums and seeing, for example, gender as more fluid than the fixed phenomenon it had previously been taken to be. Many theorists, such as Judith Butler (to whom I will be returning in section 2.3.6), associated with the poststructuralist approaches sometimes known as 'queer theory' reject binary thinking. They study what is excluded by focussing on issues such as gender, sex and sexuality in binary terms. The idea that a

person is either female or male, either gay or heterosexual, either attracted to male bodies or female bodies, is seen as excluding all in-betweens as well as essentialising each category and treating it as if it were fixed and stable (Barker and Scheele, 2016).

### **2.3.2 Discourse and new methods**

Poststructuralism has also seen a shift in focus towards the discursive constructions of truth and a view that language constructs truths, people, objects etc. Language and discourse are seen as constitutive of the worlds we know and ‘truths’ and knowledges are seen as relative to the language, or discourse that produces them (Taylor, 2001; Hall, 2001). As mentioned in Chapter 1 and discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, ‘discourse’ can also refer to other meaning-making practices such as visual images and body-language (Fairclough, 2001). Thus, in psychology, and social sciences more widely, new methodologies emerged that are still developing (e.g. Taylor and Littleton, 2006, 2012; McAvoy, 2009, 2015; Scully, 2010, 2015; Scharff, 2011a, Scharff and Riley, 2012; Wetherell, 2012).

Discourse analysis is now a well-established field involving disparate approaches.

Discourse analytic methods in psychology also reflect the wider influence of social constructionism (also discussed in Chapter 1). For example, gender researchers have turned their attention to the various social constructions of gender, and investigated how gender, and by extension femininities and masculinities, are socially and discursively constructed (e.g. Connell, 2005; Scharff, 2011b, Morison, T. and Macleod, C. (2013). This thus marks a move away from essentialist accounts of what categories such as ‘woman’ or ‘man’ mean, towards a view that such categories are neither fixed nor stable but continually constructed through language and in context.

Conversation analysis studies language in use at the micro-level. It has been challenged for its lack of a more critical engagement, for example for not paying attention to gender unless participants explicitly orient to this in conversation (e.g. Bucholtz (2003), cited in

Benwell and Stokoe, 2006); Wetherell, 1998). However, one study illustrating how conversation analysis may be used in relation to gender is Celia Kitzinger and Hannah Frith's (1999) study on how people manage refusals in conversation. This was particularly relevant as at the time 'refusal skills training', teaching young women to 'just say no' to unwanted sexual advances was considered by some as a means to reduce sexual assault. By implication, women were being advised to take greater responsibility for clarity in their refusal. Kitzinger and Frith's research clearly demonstrated that refusals in actual conversations are far more sophisticated than 'just saying no'. Outright refusals were rare, and moreover not actually necessary for a refusal to be understood *as* a refusal. This research therefore has a strong critical aspect.

Some discourse analytical approaches, such as critical discursive psychology, incorporate a more Foucauldian critical engagement and incorporates attention to contexts outside the immediate conversation (e.g. Wetherell, 1998, Edley, 2001). For example, Jill Reynolds, Margaret Wetherell and Stephanie Taylor's (2007) work on single women accounting for their single status is one example of discursive analysis bringing together analysis of talk as situated interactions and analysis of influences of wider societal structures on the ways people speak. Their approach combining critical discursive psychology and narrative analysis, enables analysis of not only how people position themselves in talk, what the talk does, that is, what its function is, but also how people are positioned by others. This is highly useful when analysing gender, for example, as it allows analysis of how people themselves do gender in their talk, as well as how they may be gendered in variable ways in the talk of others. This method has the potential to access gender as something performed in interactions both by people themselves and those with whom they interact, while focussing on the cultural and social understandings of gender drawn on by people in their talk and interactions. This approach, when applied to gender, thus views gender as performance (as discussed



further in section 2.3.6) while focussing on the wider social and cultural shared understandings people draw on in interactions with others.

More recently, Marc Scully (2015) has demonstrated how discursive analysis taking external social contexts into account can be usefully applied to analysis of affect and authenticity. His work demonstrates how an authentic identity as Irish cannot be viewed exclusively as a personal sense of authenticity, as authentic identities need to be negotiated and recognised as such within the wider meaning makings of the community. This work is important in highlighting how identities cannot be claimed in any simple fashion, but must be negotiated with others. Furthermore, Scully's study demonstrated that discursive analyses can be used very effectively to access affect, while showing how affective feelings of belonging and identity, in this case claiming Irish identity, are negotiated social accomplishments.

### **2.3.3 Socially constructed and diverse identities**

The assumption that gender is socially constructed has important political implications. Throughout the 1980s, ethnic minority women in the UK had argued that there was not one shared experience of being a woman. There was criticism of second wave feminism for being mostly applicable to and concerned with white, middleclass heterosexual women (Bradley 2013). Likewise, in the US women of colour had long been questioning who was included and excluded from studies of gender and feminism more generally (Amos and Parmar, 1984)

The increased visibility of marginalised and oppressed groups was linked to a recognition that one group's experiences may be very different to another's. Feminists started questioning their own modernist assumptions of a distinct and separate gendered identity giving all women a shared identity through shared experiences. However, this focus on smaller groups rather than a clear focus on the structures of oppression, has been accused of undermining the possibilities for collective struggle by any groups, be

that in terms of gender, class, race, or anything else (Bradley, 2013). Controversially, Waugh (1992) suggests it is unpleasantly similar to the essentialist patriarchal ideology, legitimising differential treatments of women and men by reference to inherent differences.

### **2.3.4 Identity politics**

The term ‘identity politics’ came into being alongside postmodernism and poststructuralist approaches (e.g. Heyes, 2016). It is used to describe the rise in many new groups campaigning for various sub-groups in society, such as lesbians, disabled people, black women and so on.

There is arguably considerable ambiguity in relation to identity politics. The view that no one has the right to define the experiences of someone else whose group one does not belong to, is an issue taken seriously in much feminist research, while the recurring problems of finding a common cause or unity but also recognising differences, remain. It may be seen as one of the problems of third wave feminism that while essentialism is dismissed and femininities in various guises embraced and individuality celebrated, women are still not equal, with men or with each other. This leaves unresolved for the third wave the problem of formulating a coherent struggle (I will be discussing third wave feminism in more detail in section 2.3.7). The issue of dismissing categories such as gender as fixed and stable without dismissing the idea of structural inequality, not least along gendered lines, seems complex. Likewise, poststructuralist research on gender has been criticised (e.g. by Bradley, 2013) for being too focused on details of experiences of different groups of women, at the cost of seeing gender inequality as a structural issue.

However, it is worth being cautious of the term ‘identity politics’, as it is often used as an accusation against someone, often in an attempt to discredit them. As argued by Mons Bissenbakker (2015) ‘identity’ and by extension ‘identity politics’ appears to be

something that attaches to some bodies and not others, while those who do not have ‘identity’ attached to them come to be perceived as neutral by virtue of being identity-less. In this light, he argues, it is noteworthy how it is usually the reaction to discriminatory practices that are accused of essentialising ‘identity politics’, not the discriminatory practices themselves. Bissenbakker argues further that reacting to oppressions one shares with others because the surrounding society has imposed an identity of homosexual, trans, woman or disabled onto one, is very different to essentialising these identities. Rather it is a reaction to an essentialisation one has already been subjected to.

When this research analyses experiences of young women in the UK today, it is not assuming that all young women will share all experiences. Rather, the analysis identifies discursive resources that that occur and often recur across the data, illustrating that those discourses are available for young women in their constructions of the meanings of being a young woman today. Rather than use terms pre-defined by the analyst to refer to relatively fixed categories such as ‘working class’ or ‘adult’, such categories are considered discursively co-constructed by the participants in talk, and their meanings and function in particular contexts analysed.

### **2.3.5 Intersectionality**

The recognition that there is not one female experience is not only a matter of recognising more marginalised voices. The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, to denote how women are simultaneously multiply positioned as women and for example black, lesbian or working class subjects (Phoenix, 2006). Although the concept had been employed before this, it arguably received increased attention following the postmodern critiques of modernism for overlooking women who were not white, middleclass, heterosexual etc., and with the new focus on minority groups of women.

Intersectionality goes beyond noticing that there are many groups of women, who may experience variable oppression, such as racial or class oppression as well as gender oppressions. It denotes that these oppressions are not simply added together to give a total oppression score, but interact. When thinking about identities in terms of being positioned as, for example, a woman, or black, being positioned simultaneously as black and a woman is different to adding together 'black' and 'woman'. Ann Phoenix (2006) argues that it is a "...handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it" (p 187), and Audre Lorde (1984) argues that "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives" (p. 138). These quotes can be seen as indicative of postmodern research on gender, as it summaries the break away from modernist ideas of one struggle (or at best two, if class struggle was included), to an understanding of women's lives as always multiple.

### **2.3.6 'Performativity'**

As gender came to be understood as socially constructed and gender identities increasingly seen as fluid and changeable, and identities came to be understood intersectionally, the focus of researchers increasingly shifted to meanings of femininities (now understood as plural).

A very important contribution to conceptualisation of gender was Judith Butler's theory of 'performativity' (Butler, 1993). This theory proposes that gendered subjects come into being by repeated discursive imitation or recitation of gendered norms. Butler describes this as repeated sets of acts within a "rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 43). Gender in this view is something we do, not something we are, as gendered subjects come into being by doing gender and reciting gendered norms, rather than gender, or even sex, being something people are born with. In effect, the meaning of the sexed or gendered

body comes into being by doing gender. Butler therefore does away with any idea of gender as a natural given, and with the idea of two sexes and furthermore dismisses the dichotomy of sex/gender. McNay (1999), cited in Macleod and Morison 2013, states that for Butler, “it is the cultural necessity of reiterating the symbolic norms of gender that shows them to be unoriginal and imitative in nature (i.e., copies or parodies) and therefore potentially changeable” (p. 566).

Butler's work has been highly influential. Some have seen subversive potential in her work for deconstructing gender (e.g. Conaghan, 2000; Carline, 2006). Others have argued that she does not sufficiently explain where the potential for change and disruption comes from and how individual agency is accounted for (e.g. Benhabib, Nicholson and Fraser, 1995; Cadwallader, 2009). Her work has further been criticized in ways similar to critiques of much postmodern work on gender, for underestimating the very real, tangible effects of gender categories; for example, Bradley (2013) argues that her theory of performativity is too focused on the individual level and not enough on gendered social institutions

Despite these challenges, Butler's work remains important. Her theory of gender has radically changed how gender is conceptualised. It has allowed analysts of gender to use the term in new ways, for example, talk about gendered selves, selves becoming gendered, performing gender and gendering people and objects and so on. To think of gender as a verb opens up possibilities for thinking of how gendered practices could be different and how they may be disrupted or subverted. For example, Macleod and Morison (2013) used Butler's notions of performativity in conjunction with a discursive analysis to illuminate how gender may be performed and sometimes disrupted in people's talk. I return to this in Chapter 4.

### **2.3.7 Third wave feminisms**

While second wave feminism went hand in hand with modernist research, it is arguably harder to define third wave feminism, not least because what is considered feminist and by whom varies considerably. Likewise, while some would describe current feminist movements and thinking as third wave, others again talk of a fourth wave of feminism, while some places, such as Germany, do not use the wave metaphor at all (Scharff, 2011).

Third wave feminism does not per se represent a unique way of conceptualising gender, but it can be seen as a more or less coherent way of talking about gender, which is likely to be part of the discursive environment in which young women today have grown up. R. Claire Snyder (2008) in her own words “attempts to make sense of a movement that on its face may seem like a confusing hodgepodge of personal anecdotes and individualistic claims, in which the whole is less than the sum of its parts”( p.175). She argues that rather than presenting a new set of issues or suggested solutions to long-standing dilemmas, third wave feminism can be seen as a set of tactical moves that respond to a set of theoretical problems within the second wave. She thus highlights three ‘moves’ that can be seen as responses rather than ‘grand narratives’. Firstly, third wave feminism can be seen as responding to the issue of the category ‘women’ breaking down, by foregrounding personal narratives that “illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism”. Secondly, Snyder argues, third wave feminism “embrace[s] multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification” as a consequence of the rise of postmodernism. The third move may be seen as a response to the ‘sex-wars’ that arguably divided second wave feminists, and involves a non-judgemental inclusivity and refusal to police “boundaries of the feminist political” (p. 175).

Snyder, citing Heywood (2006) traces the beginnings of the third wave back to the early 1990s, when self-declared third wavers positioned themselves in opposition to both

media-declared post-feminism and what they saw as the rigidity of the second wave. She cites Rebecca Walker, one of the first self-declared third wave feminists, explaining that for many third wavers it seemed that second wave feminism did not allow for “individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories” (Snyder, 2008, p. 176). Snyder further argues that while the third wave is hard to pin down, as many publications claiming to be ‘third wave’ consist of a loose collection of individual narratives or media analyses, this very lack of a unifying agenda is characteristic of the third wave. The third wave can thus be seen as eschewing unifying agendas, embracing multiplicities of identities and accepting of lived contradictions.

While Snyder cited Strauss (2000) as declaring that “feminism is something individual to each feminist”, she also draws out four ways in which the third wave can be seen as differing from the second wave. Firstly, there is a sense of entitlement among younger women who have grown up with the advances made towards equality since the early days of second wave feminism; in this sense, the third wave is seen as a younger generation of women, who take the idea of equality for granted, where their foremothers continually had to justify and defend themselves. The younger generation of feminists assume they are entitled to equality and are more engaged in pointing out continuing inequalities.

Secondly, third wave feminism, while not entirely rejecting every element of second wave feminism, to some extent defines itself in its rejection of the representation of second wave feminism as rigid and judgmental. In this sense, the third wave can be seen as making use of a caricature of second wave feminists as man-hating, anti-sex and anti-femininity and anti-fun. Interestingly, Snyder cites Naomi Wolf as describing the second wave as ‘victim-feminism’ (p. 179), thus including in third wave feminism a disavowal of victim positions (this is a subject I will return to later, as it merits more attention in its own right). Third wave feminism thus embraces what is sometimes

referred to as ‘girl power’ or ‘girlie culture’, here meaning wearing of make-up, high heels, and other aspects of ‘women’s feminine enculturation’ represented as seen as taboo by second wavers. Although this is not uncontested, third wave feminism thus includes a ‘project of reclamation’, of ‘sexual pleasure’ and active playing with femininity, which third wavers claim is not “shorthand for ‘we’ve been duped” (Snyder, 2008, p. 179).

In this respect, third wave feminism can be seen as defining itself in opposition to a ‘straw man’ second wave feminism, which is represented as always dour and anti-everything and equates all second wave feminists with an anti-sex position, while arguably the disagreements among second wave feminists over issues like porn and prostitution illustrate that the second wave was not homogenously in agreement over these issues, and the term ‘anti-sex’ to describe a position on porn and prostitutions is itself arguably loaded. The third wave can be seen to attempt to navigate around problems of simultaneously rejecting inequalities and embracing ‘sexiness’ and other traditional makers of femininity, without appearing as social dupes, but rather doing it as expressions of ‘girl power’. This is a contested position, and writers such as Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie have critiqued these practices as ‘postfeminist’ and more a re-enactment of old inequalities than new empowerments (This is likewise something I will return to in more detail in Chapter 3).

Thirdly, a main characteristic of the third wave is its focus on inclusivity and diversity, particularly in relation to race. Again, as argued by Snyder, this may be seen as a way of differentiating third from second wave feminism, for example by claiming authors such as Audre Lorde as early third wave writers rather than influential in shaping the second wave. However, a self-proclaimed aim of third wave feminism remains inclusivity of all by respecting differences, which extends to other aspects such as engagement in beauty culture which may have been seen previously as clashing with ‘being feminist’.



Lastly, citing Heywood (2006), Snyder argues that third wave feminism again defines itself in contrast to what is arguably a 'straw man' second wave position of only being interested in women's issues, by not having any single identifiable cause, but rather a much larger agenda for social justice.

While Third wave feminism may thus be seen as favouring personal narratives over unifying projects and grand theory, it also involves an insistence that there is no one way to be a woman. Snyder, drawing on Judith Butler's theoretical insights, argues that "By occupying female subject positions in innovative or contradictory ways, third-wavers unsettle essentialist narratives about dominant men and passive women and shape new identities within the interstices of competing narratives" (p. 185).

It can thus be argued that third wave feminism reflects simultaneously a disavowal of (caricatures of) second wave feminism, and an engagement with some of the unresolved issues of the second wave. It also responds to a postmodern world in which identities are taken to be more fluid while simultaneously emphasising 'choice' and celebrating active agentic women.

### **2.3.8 Current debates in feminism and gender identity**

The meaning of the term 'gender' can be seen as continually changing and continually subject to debate and disagreements. Third wave feminism embraces difference and celebrating 'the feminine'. It rejects essentialism and also the idea of a gender binary. The postmodern focus on disparate groups counters one of the critiques levelled at much second wave feminist work, that it overlooked too many women's experiences while being mostly relevant to white, heterosexual, middleclass women. However, the acknowledgement that 'women' are not one homogenous group has complicated how gender is approached and theorised. A poststructuralist approach to truths and knowledge complicates contemporary research, as do individualist approaches which

apparently challenge the view that class and gender are organising principles in society. This final point appears in debates around gender identity.

Recently, gender has been conceptualised as ‘gender identity’, especially in relation to trans people, to refer to people’s own understanding of their gender. This has generated debate. One of the biggest issues within feminist movements has become the arguments between various feminist groups and individuals around how to orient to trans people, especially trans women. The perceived stances of Germaine Greer and Julie Bindel that trans women are not women, has led to controversies wherever these two feminists are scheduled to speak publicly, from the UK to Norway (e.g. Morris, 2015). The controversies illustrate the complications that arises from interpreting gender either in structural terms or as subjectively experienced gender identity (angstibuksa, 2015). The structural position, as argued by second wave modernist gender researchers and feminists, is that what is most relevant in relation to gender is the way societies are structured around gendered lines, and the meanings and implications of these structures for gendered groups and individuals. The gender *identity* position is that gender should mean the subjective experience of one’s gender, for example subjectively experiencing oneself as a woman, as opposed to an external definition imposed on a person based on the appearance of external genitalia at birth. As the Norwegian blogger angstibuksa (angstibuksa, 2015) argues, the main issue is therefore between conceptualising ‘gender’ to denote structural inequalities, or to denote an individual subjective experience. In other words, the issue is whether ‘woman’ refers to a structural position in a gendered hierarchy or a subjective experience of feeling one is a ‘woman’.

## **2.3 Young Adulthood**

In the 60s and 70s, modernity and second wave feminism emerged in a time of socio-economic wider societal changes which also changed ‘youth’ and meanings of gender. As a new kind of ‘young person’ emerged in universities, and protest movements, the

life trajectories for young people, perhaps especially young women, changed. For middle class young women at least, university became an option where previously young women were not expected to go into higher education or consider careers after marriage. Thus, a new kind of young woman emerged, alongside changes in both what 'youth' and 'gender' meant. Just as 'gender' has been variably conceptualised and approached, so ideas of 'youth' and meanings of chronological age also differ.

### **2.3.1 'Young adulthood' as object of study**

Introducing their project 'Inventing adulthoods', Henderson et al. (2007) discuss various approaches to 'youth'. On the one hand, youth may be seen as a generation; for example, contemporary young people have variously been described as 'generation Y' or 'millennials'. On the other, youth may be seen as a life stage. In the generational view, young people are characterised by an era. For example, millennials may be characterised in contrast to retrospective views of the youth of previous generations, often in terms of technological change, economic downturn, increased unemployment and extended dependence on parents. This view, while capturing important influences on the social contexts in which people live, concentrates on similarities across a generation. According to Henderson et al., it may generalise the experiences of a minority to the majority.

The life course, or stage, approach, on the other hand, characterises youth as adolescence. According to Erik Erikson (e.g. 1968, cited in Miell, Phoenix and Thomas, 2002), for example, this is a time of experimentation, a psycho-social moratorium where identities can be played and experimented with. In this view, this is also a time of rebellion and conflict as part of the phase between childhood and adulthood. Henderson et al. critique this approach for viewing young people 'out of time', "in an a-historical model of 'normal' development" (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 19). They cite Griffin (1993) who points out how 'norms' are a product of a particular time and place.

Furthermore, this view of youth has been criticised for assuming an adult viewpoint, thus “preventing us from looking at, listening to and recognising the present tense, the lived experience of being young” (James et al., cited in Henderson et al., p.19).

Henderson et al. argue that both the generational and the stage view of youth inform a contemporary view of today's youth as stuck in an extended adolescence, unable to achieve full adulthood and adult responsibilities. However, echoing James argument above, this view could be claimed to assume an adult viewpoint of what full adulthood means, without taking young people's experiences of this into account. From a discursive viewpoint, it seems likely that the view of youth today as not fully adult will constitute one discursive resource for young people to draw on in constructing the meanings of young adulthood, and what it would mean to become fully adult.

Accordingly, this thesis looks into how young women construct the meanings of youth and adulthood, and what the functions and effects of such constructions are.

Drawing on Anthony Giddens' concept of 'the reflexive project of the self', Henderson et al. point out that in the present-day society of 'late modernity' there is no simple destination for growing up: “we are all in the vivid present attempting to get somewhere, but to an elusive place” (p.20). In this view, adulthood is not something that exists. Instead, it has to be invented, through the telling and ordering of narratives of the self. In doing this, people draw on existing narrative repertoires available to them, which reflects the cultural and social resources they have access to. (This offers parallels to the critical discursive and narrative approaches I adopt in my research, introduced in Chapter 4.)

To make sense of increasingly fragmented paths to adulthood, some researchers cited by Henderson et al. distinguish between 'normal' and 'choice' biographies. For example, Du Bois-Reymond (1998, cited in Henderson et al.) argues that there are 'gender specific normal biographies', where young people aim for clearly defined professions

early on, and enter into steady relationships in order to start a family, and ‘non-gender specific choice biographies. Although she sees gender as less determining than it once was, she argues that ‘the pull of tradition’ is felt more by young women than young men, in that they are more willing to accommodate their careers to family demands.

Other researchers (e.g. Ann Nielsen and Julia Brannen, 2002, cited in Henderson et al.) argue that the distinction between ‘normal’ and ‘choice’ biographies is simplistic, and overlooks the significance of structural inequalities within which choices are made.

Henderson et al. argue that although categories such as gender, class and ethnicity may not “operate as a shared point of reference for navigation” amongst the now multiple maps for paths to adulthood, they continue to shape young people’s lives and chances.

Arguably, there is now less social mobility than a generation ago, in spite of a contemporary rhetoric of meritocracy. Old forms of inequality are being remade in new ways. Citing Beverly Skeggs (2004) and Lisa Adkins (2002), Henderson et al. point out that the reflexive project of the self is not assumed to apply equally to everyone, indeed it is mainly white middle class men who are assumed to have a self that that can become a project and are rewarded for displaying reflexivity (p.24).

How class and gender influence young women’s biographies, and the extent to which young women themselves explain their biographies in relation to entering steady relationships, having children and choosing careers in terms of class and gender traditions is an interesting question. In light of what Giddens termed ‘the reflexive project of the self’, it may be that although career choices and plans for starting families tend to follow gendered and classed patterns, young women themselves may explain their choices in more individualised terms. This research investigates how young women talk about plans for the future and which possibilities and constraints emerge from their constructions of imagined futures.

### **2.3.2 Transition**

The sociologists Rachel Thomson, Robert Bell, Janet Holland, Sheila Henderson, Sheena McGrellis and Sue Sharpe (2002) conducted a study “Critical Moments: Choice, Chance and Opportunity in Young People's Narratives of Transition”, that looked at the interplay of social structures, personal agency and circumstance in the experiences of young people in the UK. They conducted interviews with young people aged 16-19 from diverse areas of the UK and analysed the interplay of timing, opportunity and identity in the life stories of the young people. One finding was that “in late modern culture the transition from youth to adulthood is increasingly non-linear and heterogeneous” (Thomson et al., 2002). The researchers argue that the traditional focus of youth research on the transitions from school to work has been replaced by a focus on the interplay between several ‘strands’, such as education, employment, training, housing, family, income, consumption, and relationships. While equating ‘transition to adulthood’ with achieving ‘independence’, Thomson et al. point out that young people may be independent in some spheres of their lives while dependent in others. This point is also highlighted in the later book ‘Inventing adulthood’ from the same study, where the researchers argue that young people experiencing competence in some areas (e.g. caring for siblings/family) while not experiencing similar levels of competence in areas such as education, which in turn influences the choices made by the participants.

Thomson et al. (2002) were looking into the subjective meanings of current situations, important changes and reflections on future possibilities of the young interviewees with the aim of working through the relationship between their individual and social circumstances. In doing so, the researchers considered how critical moments (defined by either participant or researcher as an important, consequential event) in young people’s lives may reflect structural patterns. The researchers also considered whether differing levels of agency and self-awareness has material consequences. They defined

the young people's agency and imaginations as their abilities to recognise or define an event as a critical moment with opportunities to take control of their lives. They looked at the interplay between agency and structure in 'critical moments' of young people's transitions into adulthood across various spheres of their lives, and found variability in who can choose how and what in response to events; the amount of agency young people experienced was not simply a matter of the nature of the event. Some young people were found to display more agency, or greater ability to respond agentically, in given situations than others in similar situations, which in turn was related to access to, and capacity to take advantage of, resources.

Thomson et al. found that it was the responses of young people to events, rather than the events themselves, that were most revealing of social inequalities, as responses depended on the availability of both social, emotional and material support. In looking in detail at three case studies, they examined the options available to each young person, in terms of investments in identities, being positioned by others as a particular sort of person (e.g. one young man was found to be invested in, and positioned by others as 'the bad boy') emotional and social support from parents and friends as well as material resources available at home or at school. These three young people had very differential access to support and although the 'events' considered were similar to each, each responded very differently. While each young person could be seen as responding agentically, the outcomes were interpreted as varying in how constructive they were for the person in question. The authors conclude that "the descriptive concept of the critical moment provides us with a way of seeing how social and economic environments frame individual narratives and the personal and cultural resources on which young people are able to draw" (p. 51). Their analysis highlights the centrality of identity and subjectivity to understanding transitions, while avoiding the reduction of transition to individual psychology and furthermore illustrates the importance of other people and

being positioned by others as a particular kind of person for how individuals go on in the present.

### **2.3.3 Young adulthood and older norms**

Cote and Bynner (2008), like other youth researchers, argue that over the past century, there has been a decline in the relevance of traditional social markers of adulthood, as the routes to adult statuses such as moving from education to work, financial independence, marriage and starting a family have extended and dependence on families of origin continues for longer. They argue that following the structural changes in young adults' transitions to adulthood, there is "a diminishing of social norms, and an increase in social anomie in secular institutions and communities that hitherto provided normative structures that guided people into adult roles" (Cote and Bynner, 2008, p. 261). From their sociological viewpoint, society now provides fewer agreed-upon rules and "a lower consensus regarding appropriate behaviour" (p. 261) which, in their view, means young adults navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood must make up the void in meaning through the individualisation process, for example by taking responsibility for their own actions and decisions. Arguing against Jeffery Arnett's (2000) propositions that the age group 18-25 represents a separate developmental stage, one of "explorations of various kinds" and "self-focused identity explorations" as this is the most norm-less period of life (Arnett, 2000, cited in Cote and Bynner, 2008), Cote and Bynner point out that such explorations are more readily available to middle than working class young adults. While Cote and Bynner thus agree with Arnett that the transition to adulthood has been extended, they dismiss Arnett's idea of 18-25 being an age of free choice and exploration for all young adults. Cote and Bynner suggest that the age group 18-25 can be considered 'young adults', signifying they are between



adolescence and adulthood, thus inserting a new category in between the stages of ‘adolescence’ and ‘adulthood’ from more traditional stage theories such as Erikson’s.

Cote and Bynner’s argument with Arnett mainly revolves around class in sociological terms. However, it is possible to argue that findings by Laura Hamilton and Elisabeth Armstrong’s ethnographic study (2009) support their argument. Hamilton and Armstrong used longitudinal ethnographic and interview data to study a group of college women’s sexual and romantic careers in the US. While the research was mainly on ‘hooking up’ culture, they also found that less privileged women often planned a faster transition to adulthood (in their study defined as ‘getting married’) indicating classed differences in transition to adulthood.

Furthermore, Emily Caroline Bishop (2012) conducted a qualitative interview study covering a number of themes relating to sex experiences and preferences and the meanings attributed to sex by 18-26 years old Australians. She found older gendered and repressive discourses around sex had not been quashed by newer third wave feminist discourses of pleasure and enjoyment of sex, indeed the old ‘sexual double standard’ was alive and well for the young women in her study. This suggests that as newer discourses develop, they do not simply replace older norms. Rather, people are negotiating meanings of behaviours, experiences and personal preferences within a complex field of pre-existing and constantly changing meanings.

While it may now be more difficult for young adults to achieve the financial independence and steady employment sometimes associated with adulthood, it may be simplistic to state that a loosening of the normative structures that may at one point have guided people into adulthood equate to a ‘void in meaning’ and a lack of norms. The findings by Bishop and by Hamilton and Armstrong indicate that gendered norms and

expectations are very significant in young women's lives, and that these intersect with class. It seems that while less overt now than in more 'traditional' societies, gendered and classed norms have not disappeared, but have been, as argued by Henderson et al., "remade in new ways".

Moreover, following Cote and Bynner's and Arnett's arguments that older norms have been replaced by what they term the 'individualisation process', this emphasis on personal responsibility can itself be seen as a new norm, which interacts with gendered norms in ways that are in turn influenced by social class. While young adulthood could thus be considered a time when young women are freer to explore different ways of doing femininity than they would be at other times of life, they arguably do so within existing and newer classed and gendered constructions of acceptable femininity. As youth scholars have been debating the extent to which older norms have been replaced by the individualisation process and the extent to which older norms still influence young people's possibilities, it seems likely young women themselves likewise draw on discourses variably positing youth as a time of experimentation, freedom from older gender-norms, individualisation and extended adolescence while still also being influenced by older gendered norms. However, we know little about how young women negotiate such varied constructions of youth and what it means to be a young adult today. As meanings of youth and young womanhood are socially negotiated and performed in discourse, this thesis aims to explicate how young women construct young womanhood in the UK today.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

Gender can be variably understood as classed structure, individual feelings of gender identity and something performed, and has been variably approached both theoretically

and methodologically. The approach adopted in this thesis draws on Butler's theory of performativity and critical discursive traditions in psychology, as this approach focusses on what people do in talk and interactions, and how various meanings of gender are drawn on by people in their talk. It is to be expected that people may make use of several different meanings and definitions of gender in their talk, and that these may not be consistent or always coherent. Various understandings of gender may be made relevant in given conversations and what is of interest here is which understanding are used by women in their talk and what the uses of various meanings of gender may open up or close down. Similarly, the categories 'youth' and 'young adulthood' have been variably defined and approached, but what is of interest here is how young women construct youth and young womanhood.

As gender, womanhood and young adulthood have been variably defined and understood, this thesis will investigate how young women negotiate contemporary discursive constructions of femininity and how they negotiate these if they see them as contradictory. It will analyse which of the ways of doing femininity are encouraged, and which possibilities are opened up or closed down by the discourses young women can draw upon. It will furthermore investigate how youth and adulthood are discursively constructed by young women in Britain today.

## **Chapter 3 Contemporary young women**

This chapter considers the contemporary context of the lives of the young women I study. It starts by outlining dominant characterizations of early 21<sup>st</sup> century people, by reviewing Anthony Giddens' account of late modernity and Nikolas Rose's account of neoliberalism to give a clearer picture of aspects of the contemporary context relevant to this research. This is followed by a brief outline of a discursive approach to identity, which is also the approach I adopt.

In the second half of the chapter, I focus specifically on exploring how theory and empirical research has looked at problems for contemporary young women. This includes theoretical views of what the pressing issues for young women are, as well as research findings on what is considered problematic for young women right now. I review literature on the concepts of 'empowerment', 'agency' and 'choice', as well as empirical findings and debates currently taking place around the concept of 'victimhood'.

I propose that there appear to be potentially contradictory cultural demands on young women today to simultaneously claim empowerment, deny constraints *and* live up to cultural expectations of success across the sites of education, employment and a sexy body.

### **3.1 Theoretical analyses of 'the present'**

In the following sections I shall use the term 'the present' to denote what has variably been described as late capitalism, neoliberalism, late modernity and modern liberal democracies. 'The present' is also used in a broader sense to refer the current state in societies or countries that may be described as 'late capitalist' and 'western'.

When looking at conditions of ‘the present’, the question of what we are comparing it with arises. One aspect that is immediately pertinent when considering conditions for youth today in the UK, is that of employment prospects, or lack thereof. According to a September 2015 briefing paper to The House of Commons, the unemployment rate in May-July 2015 for 16-24 year olds was 15.6% and 14.1% for people aged 18-24 (Delebarre, 2015), while Portes (2013) quotes the unemployment rate in 2012 for 16-24-year-olds as ‘close to 20% (for statistical purposes, the group ‘youth’ often consists of 16-24 year olds). Another aspect of the labour market discussed by Portes is underemployment, a term used for workers in paid employment who are willing to work more hours than offered by their employer. According to Porters, this phenomenon is especially widespread among the ‘youth’ group, where 30% of those employed can be defined as underemployed. While ways of measuring rates of un- and under-employment may vary, and there is some variation in who is included in the category ‘youth’, the above figures give some indication that employment cannot be taken for granted, nor can people, especially young people, assume any particular level of income should they find paid employment. Likewise, it cannot currently be taken for granted that having a paying job means permanent employment. Any discussion of conditions for young women today thus has to be considered in the light of job insecurity for those who have jobs, underemployment, zero hour contracts and unemployment. This is not to say that under- and unemployment applies directly to all young women at all times, rather that it is part of the social context which people, including young women, navigate.

The current employment situation is often contrasted with a time of no unemployment and ‘jobs for life’, and while there may not be recorded periods of completely full employment in the UK, the 1960s and 70s were close to it. The current conditions can be seen as marked by a new precariousness in terms of access to work related incomes,

a precariousness that especially stands out in comparison with an ideal of full employment and job security for all.

Several theorists have analysed current conditions in wider terms, and discuss the concepts of ‘individualism’ and ‘choice’ as key characteristics of contemporary society, associated with the current stage of capitalism. In the following sections, I consider theoretical approaches to these concepts.

### **3.2.1 Individualism, choice and reflexive life-planning**

#### **3.2.1.1 Giddens: choices and reflexive life-planning**

The work of Anthony Giddens contributes to the ‘reflexive modernisation thesis’. This suggests that where selves used to be produced in local networks and kin and family ties, we now have a new way of life, where “individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves” (Beck, 1994, cited in Lawler, 2008, p.34).

Furthermore, present conditions of being are described in terms of individualisation, where, “‘individualisation’ means the disintegration of the certainties of industrial society as well as the compulsion to find and invent new certainties for oneself and others without them” (Beck, 1997, cited in Block, 2013, p 133). Steph Lawler (2008) adds to this that not only are people now assumed to *be* autonomous individuals, but this is now seen as something they *ought* to be (Lawler, 2008, p. 35, emphasis in original).

Anthony Giddens (e.g. 1991) has written extensively on what he terms ‘late modernity’, contrasting the present with ‘traditional’ societies. He does not argue that there is an absence of social structures, but rather, in the debate on agency versus structure, argues the two are intertwined. Giddens does not deny the notion of human agency in favour of a deterministic influence of structure, or indeed insinuate human beings in this age are agents free of structural constraints. However, he does expansively outline how he sees

people as having to reflexively make choices where they would not have been called upon to make choices or reflect on this in previous times.

For my purposes, leaving aside for now the argument over agency vs. structure, which will be considered in more depth in section 3.2.1.3 and in Chapter 4, Giddens' account of how people go about producing self-identities in modern times is of interest. Giddens argues that in post-traditional societies the self undergoes massive changes, as life is not ordered along relatively set channels as in traditional societies. Life in modern times thus not only confronts individuals with complex choices and alternatives where previously 'lifestyles' were handed down, but individuals now have no choice but to choose. Individuals now have to make choices about anything from how to dress, what to eat but also larger scale choices regarding career, whether and whom to marry, whether or not to have children and so on. The choices made are thus not only choices about how to act, but who to be. For Giddens, choices and small decisions made everyday form the routinized practices of a lifestyle. A lifestyle then, is defined as "a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens, 1991, p 81).

Giddens lists five influences on the plurality of choices facing people in modern societies. Firstly, the availability of alternatives, which again he considers absent in traditional societies, means that individuals today make choices when they act in the world, for example they now choose what religion to follow, if any. Secondly, he argues that the settings of modern living are now much more diverse and segmented. Most obvious perhaps are the present segregations of public and private, work and home, where family belongs in the 'home' setting, while these spheres themselves are subject to a plurality of different environments with accordingly different styles, or what Giddens calls "milieux of action" (p.83).

His third explication of the plurality of choices facing individuals today concerns the uncertain status of knowledges or beliefs. In Giddens' view, while the enlightenment project sought to replace arbitrary beliefs with the certainty of reason, present day life offers a multitude of knowledge claims, meaning people must also choose, and continually reflect on, which expert claims to believe. Thus, no beliefs can be permanent but must be continually reflected on.

His fourth point concerns 'mediated experience'; the multiple possibilities and milieux rendered visible via media. Considering he wrote about this in 1991, mentioning as examples 'television' and 'newspapers', the impact of this today, in a time of fast and massive developments of social communication networks and sources of digitally available media, may be considered potentially of greater import than imagined at the time.

Lastly Giddens highlights how living in a social world in which a plurality of choices permeates every aspect of life also affects peoples' relationships with others. He points out that the term 'relationship' itself now mostly refers to romantic and sexual partners and friendships, and only when these relationships are chosen, rather than given or arranged, which has changed the nature of intimacy and relationships. These are now supposed to be 'pure relationships' in which partners or friends have freely chosen each for what the relationship can give each partner, and people are continually open to reflexive evaluation of what the relationship provides.

In the light of these reflexive choices people have to make, life planning in ways coherent with one's biography or the narrative of oneself takes on particular significance. The self and living in present society becomes a reflexive project of the self, a project individuals continually must reflect on and make choices to forge. The selection of friends and partners here becomes an element of reflexively considered and chosen lifestyles. However, it is important to note that Giddens does not postulate that



individuals make their lifestyles anew with every choice made. On the contrary, as lifestyles involves clusters of habits and orientations, and people's own sense of coherence involves seeing themselves as a particular and coherent kind of person, they tend to make choices that seem to cohere with their lifestyle or character.

While 'the present' is thus, in Giddens' view, characterised by 'choice' and reflexivity, he is however not saying that every individual, regardless of context and circumstances, always has free choice. Rather, he highlights that people have no choice but to choose, choosing is integral to being a self and living in the present, even as some individuals have more options than others. For example, in the light of the figures for un- and under-employment quoted at the beginning of this chapter, it would indeed be odd to claim that every individual living in present late capitalist societies has free choice of occupation. However, in accordance with Giddens arguments, it is feasible to say that regardless of employment status, every individual has to reflexively consider options and make future plans in terms of their occupation. While, clearly, the specific options and considerations people can take into account in their planning will vary, following Giddens' reasoning no individual stands outside the obligations to choose and make future lifestyle plans as part of a reflexive project of their self, regardless of any actual options available to them.

### **3.2.1.2 Rose and 'the self' as a choosing subject**

The idea that individuals living in modern times must live as choosing subjects is also proposed by Nikolas Rose. In outlining mechanisms of governing in liberal democracies, he gives an account of how the subject of government is now specified in a new way (Rose, 1996, in Miller and Rose, 2008). From the mid 1980s he sees a shift in the language and political programmes articulated across the political field towards a language of freedom, autonomy and choice. From being referred to as passive and dependent, citizens increasingly came to be conceptualised, or at least described, as

active and individualised. The concept of choice as ideal and individual self-fulfilment as a goal attainable through making good choices emerged alongside the reconfiguration of citizens as consumers.

Rose highlights how the language of choice also underpins the reform of public services such as health care and education into acts of consumption, thus bringing such domains into the realm of the market via the language of consumption and consumer choice. The active individual citizens in this way of thinking are construed as consumers seeking to ‘enterprise themselves’, achieving fulfilment through acts of consumption. Individuals are now seen as responsible, ideally independent and capable of forging their own lifestyles. They are now not governed through direct control by public powers, but rather through a range of technologies which shape and guide the capacities, skills and wills of subjects. Miller and Rose (1990, 2008) argue that

“to such basic nation-forming devices as common language, skills of literacy and transportation networks, the twentieth century has added the mass media of communication with their pedagogies through documentary and soap opera; opinion polls and other devices that provide reciprocal links between authorities and subjects; the regulation of lifestyles through advertising marketing and the world of goods; and the experts of subjectivity “(Miller and Rose, 2008, p214).

These technologies constitute the ways and the means of governing the modern citizen indirectly. The idea of the individual as responsible for themselves and their own welfare through the choices they make remains. For Miller and Rose the notion of ‘choice’ is thus heavily implicated with governing mechanisms, while actual choice is illusory.

This language of individuals as autonomous beings striving for self-fulfilment resonates across (party)political ideologies. While Giddens talks about modern selves as engaged in reflexive projects of the self, Rose (1998) links such projects of the self with the

ethics and language of enterprise, which might be seen as adopting market or business vocabulary into projects of the self and the forging of lifestyles. He outlines how ‘experts of the psyche’ and expert techniques promise the transformations of selves in the direction of happiness and fulfilment via ‘automatization’ and ‘responsibilization’ of the self, bringing into alignment modes of life that might have appeared philosophically opposed. Thus, as he explains, the language and ethics of enterprise, such as competitiveness, strength, vigour, boldness, outward orientation and the urge to succeed can now be brought into alignment with notions of personal growth and authenticity, previously considered outside the realm of ‘enterprise’.

Furthermore, Rose argues that people are represented and addressed increasingly in all areas of life *as if they were selves* of a particular type: suffused with an individualised subjectivity, motivated by anxieties and aspirations concerning their self-fulfilment, committed to finding their true identities and maximising their authentic expressions in their lifestyles” (pp. 169-170, emphasis in original). Rose argues, based on the popularity of psychology-related problematics in the media and the uptake of various forms of counselling and therapy, that people have to a great extent come to recognize themselves in this image and relate to themselves in analogous term, as actors ‘seeking to enterprise’ their lives through choices made. However, while for Giddens these enterprises and choices are actual conditions of living in late modernity, Rose views such enterprises, choices and authentic selves expressed through lifestyles as imaginary notions, ideas of ways of thinking and being that are ‘sold’ to people, rather than any true freedoms of choice. Rose’s writing is thus largely concerned with analysing the mechanisms and workings of government and an explication of how people are constricted by neoliberal governance and ways of thinking, where Giddens’ is concerned with actual agency and choices.

### **3.2.1.3 Between autonomy and top-down governance**

While Giddens can be critiqued for overstating contemporary autonomy and the extent to which people choose their own biographies, and Miller and Rose for taking a rather totalising view of top-down governance, other writers approach the study of people living in the present conditions in ways that challenge and complicate both theorisations.

Taylor (2015) draws on concepts from critical discursive psychology (e.g. Wetherell, 1998) to outline a narrative-discursive approach to subjectivity, which captures “a subject who is produced by but not wholly subject to contemporary sociocultural locations” (Taylor, 2015, p. 9). While I will be discussing subjectivity in greater depth in Chapter 4 in relation to the methodology adopted in this thesis, it is relevant to briefly consider it here, as the issues over the extent to which people autonomously choose their life trajectories or are determined by prevailing structures involve considering how subjects are produced.

Taylor’s approach differs from the theoretical accounts outlined above because in critical discursive psychology the analytic focus is on language in use, rather than on individuals who are assumed to pre-exist discourse or on systems or structures. The focus on language in a discursive conceptualisation of subjectivity explores cultural and discursive resources as used by people in talk. It therefore aims to capture meanings and ways of making sense of the world taken up by people navigating contemporary life. In discursive research, meanings are considered unfixed, flexible and situated in the given context of use. Language is analysed as part of the social context in which certain values dominate and where certain meanings are carried and contested. Discursive research is therefore concerned with sociohistorically specific moments and with analysing what is being done in particular situated interactions.

This approach views concepts such as ‘choice’ and ‘agency’ as discursive resources, that is, as concepts drawn on in talk which carries certain meanings. It is thus both an approach to subjectivity which sees people as neither wholly autonomous or completely determined and a method for accessing current situated meaning making.

Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor (2007) present a narrative-discursive analysis of how single women talk about their relationships and reasons for being single. This was thus an empirical analysis of how individuals do identity work in talk about themselves and their lives, in the context described by Giddens as anchored less in traditional structures and more on personal choices. This analysis highlighted how singleness, in spite of the alleged absence of traditional structures, is still often treated as a deficit identity, which was something the participants in this study had to work around in their accounts.

Furthermore, the concept of choice was in this analysis approached as a discursive resource, that is, as a cultural concept that the participants had available to them when constructing identities in their talk about themselves.

This is a different approach to ‘choice’ than found in discussions over the extent to which people do, or do not, have choices in forging their biographies, as it views ‘choice’ as a concept people may invoke when constructing identities in situated talk. It also highlights how, currently, choice is a concept that people do draw on, along with talking in ways that make them appear active and empowered.

The study furthermore found that while the participants drew on the above concepts, they also drew on more traditional ideas of women waiting for a man to ask them to marry in their accounts of why they had not married, which created ambiguities around choice that sometimes created ‘trouble’ in the women’s accounts. Reynolds et al.’s study illustrates how ‘choice’ and ‘agency’ are invoked in people’s talk and are used by speakers to position themselves as actively choosing people, which is currently socially desirable. However, as illustrated by this study, there is not a simple question of

whether people do, or do not, have choices and power to forge their own biographies. Rather people may use concepts of 'choice' to position themselves as certain kinds of people in their situated talk, while other discursive resources that may seem inconsistent with this are simultaneously in play. Reynolds et al. demonstrated that 'choice' can be approached as a resource used in talk to do identity work for the speaker and that this kind of identity work is currently positively evaluated. However, in situated talk 'choice' and 'agency' may become troubled as speakers make use of other, potentially inconsistent discursive resources.

### **3.2.2. Feminist perspectives on current societal focus on 'choice'**

The concept of 'choice' has also been approached from feminist perspectives. One particular focus has been media influences, especially on young women. Giddens argued, that mediated experience contributes to a plurality of choice. The media, in broad terms, have also been heavily criticised for closing down choices via its narrow representation of women and girls. For example, the current UK campaign 'Let Toys be Toys' criticises the gendering of toys on the basis that it narrows choices along gendered lines ([lettoysbetoys.org.uk](http://lettoysbetoys.org.uk)). I shall not go into the discussion of how and whether media open up or close down possibilities and choices for women here. However, it is noteworthy that the underlying assumption of some campaigns against media influences remains that 'choice' and a plurality of choices is desirable. As in the example of the 'Let Toys be Toys' campaign, the ideal of the freely choosing individual is often left intact, while critiques focus on factors that reduce the number of available choices.

Critically examining what she terms "a feminist politics of choice" (p. 303), Shelly Budgeon (2015) argues that while second wave feminism highlighted factors constraining women's choices and advocated for women's right to make choices in the first place, we are now seeing a new form of feminism that advocates for validating all

choices made by women, as expressions of their self-determining, individuated and empowered selves. She discusses the implications of this 'choice feminism' from a sociological viewpoint, arguing that this feminism has "been recuperated in the service of late capitalism and neoliberal forms of governance" (Budgeon, 2015, p303). By moving away from analyses of the organisation of gender relations to a focus on, and celebration of, 'choices', this version of feminism aligns easily with neoliberalism, as "Neoliberal governmentality fundamentally involves a turning away from critique of the dominant political order in favour of subscribing to choice as a form of freedom" (p. 313). So, not only is it a feminism more palatable to neoliberal order, it has also become toothless as it fails to critically engage with inequalities.

Budgeon outlines how much second wave feminism came to be associated with a victim narrative, which is now often repudiated in favour of a narrative emphasising capabilities, empowerment and success. "The accusation that feminism has failed to move beyond a victim paradigm, and thereby refuses to engage with women's agency, is a foundational premise of choice feminism. By positively evaluating women's choices as evidence of women's exercise of freedom the troubled relationship between femininity and feminism is seemingly resolved" (p. 306.) Here Budgeon usefully draws attention to the often problematic tendency to interpret any choice made by a woman as inherently an exercise of freedom, as if regardless of the choices made, and the conditions in which they were made, any choice is evidence of agency and therefore of freedom.

An example of this was shown in a study by Joanne Baker. In research on how disadvantaged 18-25-year-old women accounted for their situations, the Australian feminist researcher Joanne Baker (2010) found that the women she interviewed overwhelmingly over-stated volition and denied 'victimhood', in attempts to live up to ideals of being "a post-feminist, neoliberal success" (Baker, 2010, p. 200). When Baker

interviewed the women in 2003-4, they went to great lengths to distance themselves from any association with victimhood and emphasized agency and self-determination in talking about their lives. Baker found that in the women's talk, "victimhood was associated with self-pity, insufficient personal drive and a lack of personal responsibility for one's own life and was therefore strenuously avoided" (p.190).

While drawing on one's own agency and emphasising one's own choice can be interpreted as shaped by current sensibilities and ways of thinking about selves in highly individuated terms, doing so may also be seen as living up to what are arguably requirements of neoliberal ideology, in the sense that to position oneself positively, it appears necessary to talk of oneself as an agentially choosing person. However, Baker also found that talking of their own lives in this way, made it very difficult for these disadvantaged women to articulate experiences of difficulties and inequality.

These women's strategies resemble the strategy of a participant in a study by psychologist Valerie Walkerdine. Walkerdine (2003) discusses how one woman interpreted societal constraints and impossible workloads in terms of her personal "failure, her pathology or her standards" (p. 240). Thus, the ways these women have available to them of making sense of the world shape their options for both acting and thinking, and makes Nikolas Rose's concept of "the obligation to be free" (Rose, 1999) particularly pertinent.

Budgeon traces the development towards viewing any choice made by a woman as evidence of agency and freedom back to the second wave feminism where much of the battle was to gain recognition of women as autonomously choosing agents, on a par with men. However, Budgeon argues that this focus on autonomy and choosing in itself, has foreclosed more critical engagements with social justice, and made 'feminism' oddly compatible with neoliberalism. In her critical exposition of effects of the current focus on choice, she argues that one effect of fighting to politicise the personal has been



to deliberate on women's individual experiences which indicates a lack of consensus over whether it is possible to find common ground of social conditions shared by all women. As discussed in Chapter 2, the debate over whether there are conditions shared by all women on the basis of gender, that is, whether feminism can represent and struggle for all women as a class, or whether women's experiences are too diverse to find common ground for all women, was one of the great debates emerging with second wave feminism.

Budgeon argues that one of the consequences of this unresolved issue is an increased focus on individual experiences. She elaborates that

“this legacy provides the foundations for debates which are again materializing around ‘choice feminism’ and are finding expression in a growing body of research which examines the wide-ranging choices women negotiate in their daily lives according to norms that shape the performance of contemporary femininity.” (p. 305-306).

Budgeon argues against too much focus on such ‘choices’ in themselves, proposing shifting the focus to the norms shaping those choices. Citing Widdows (2013, cited in Budgeon, 2015), Budgeon argues that the focus on choice may in part be explained by a need to avoid positioning women as helpless victims, but the focus should be on whether what is chosen is “worthwhile and beneficial, or at least not detrimental, exploitative, and destructive” (p.306), rather than only on whether something was chosen or not. Budgeon thus links repudiation of perceived victimhood with development of versions of feminism that celebrate choice. In her analysis, these feminisms can then be seen as simultaneously silencing any arguments against any choices made by any women, and celebrating a neoliberal idea of meritocracy, in which all women are free by virtue of agentically choosing *anything*.

Budgeon elaborates how the problem with this celebration of choices of any kind is that while the ‘personal’ here is equated with individual specificity and individual choices, the ‘personal’ must now always be respected, the choices are seen as beyond questioning, which loses the politicising of ‘the personal’ of previous feminisms. While the politicisation of the personal at one time involved drawing attention to how private, individual lives were not separate from wider society, as discussed in Chapter 2, in Budgeon’s analysis the politicisation of ‘the personal’ has now come to mean the right of women to choose, while the actual choices made are seen as beyond the remit of politicisation, which serves to foreclose critical analysis of how gendered subjects are produced and the power dynamics involved.

In this critique, Budgeon echoes Rosalind Gill, who argues strongly against the model of ‘choice’ that presumes a freely choosing, rational, autonomous agent. In a similar argument to that of Nikolas Rose, Gill (2007) argues for the necessity of interrogating ‘choice’ in the context of asking the arguably more difficult questions of “how power works in and through subjects, not in terms of crude manipulation but by structuring our sense of self, by constructing particular kinds of subjectivity” (p.76). While specifically addressing a question of how young women dress which I shall not go into details about here, Gill argues that we cannot consider ‘choice’ without looking into how it is that, in this case, socially constructed ideals of beauty or sexiness are internalized and made our own. This complicates the notion of ‘choice’ as currently culturally celebrated by highlighting the need to consider how personal choices so often reflect existing socially constructed ideals.

While choice feminism and an uncritical celebration of all women’s choices has proliferated, voices critiquing this and pointing to the ‘too easy’ relationship between feminism and neoliberalism are increasingly coming forward. For example, 2015 saw the publication of “Freedom Fallacy” (Kiraly and Tyler, 2015), a collection of essays by

a mix of academics, freelance writers, PhD students and women known mostly for their internet blog posts, engaging critically with what they see as a fallacy, or illusion of choice, and the limits of neoliberal feminism.. In the empirical chapters, I engage with how social and discursive contexts normalise some choices, thereby encouraging them, while discouraging others.

## **3.2 The issues with young women according to recent empirical research**

### **3.2.1 ‘Empowerment’, ‘agency’ and ‘choice’**

#### **3.2.1.1 Research on Sexualisation**

Current research on young women very often engages with the questions discussed in the previous section and frequently does this via a concern with ‘sexualisation’. While this thesis is not primarily concerned with the subject of ‘sexualisation’, this concept needs mentioning here as it frequently frames the debates surrounding the other critically relevant concepts of agency and empowerment.

The British and Icelandic psychologists Helen Malson, Emma Halliwell, Irmgard Tischner and Annadís Rúðólfssdóttir (2011) analysed how 18-21 year-old women interpreted what Gill terms ‘midriff’ advertising. The caricatured image of the ‘midriff’ is “a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for sex’” (Gill, 2008b, p. 437) The researchers conducted a Foucauldian discourse analysis of focus group interviews with seven young women invited to discuss such advertising. They found that the participants used “feminist-like” arguments to “critique post-feminist images of women and the neoliberal gender-politics embedded therein” (p. 96), by construing the empowerment ostensibly portrayed by these images as illusory. However, the researchers also found that participants simultaneously recognised the appeal of such images, arguably

showing how “these images ...constitute a visual pedagogy in how to see and experience our bodies as normal/ideal or –more likely- defective” (Bordo, 2003, cited in Malson et al., 2011, p. 79)), whereby the sexiness represented by “the midriff” was construed both as something to aspire to and critically distance oneself from. According to Malson et al., some young women do see contradictions between media representation of “sexy” beauty-ideals and the idea that women living up to these are empowered. However, while the participants questioned whether the women in the advertisements were truly empowered, they did so in terms of suggesting these women were more ‘man-pleasing’ than pleasing themselves and were in fact ‘slutty’ (p. 86). The terminology used by these participants suggests that although they were critical of the advertisements representation of empowerment, the notion of ‘empowerment’ as an ideal to aspire to was taken as self-evident. Moreover, the participants construed genuine empowerment as being authentically self-pleasing.

### **3.2.1.2 Debates over Empowerment**

In a study specifically concerned with the ‘empowerment’ of girls, Canadian sociologists Dawn H. Currie, Deirdre M. Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz (2006) analysed 21 interviews with 18 girls from a larger study. These girls were selected because they labelled themselves ‘geeks’ and saw themselves as different to other girls in their school. In the researchers’ words, they “consciously positioned themselves against an ‘emphasized femininity’ that made many of their schoolmates popular in a highly competitive, male-oriented youth culture” (Currie et al., 2006, p. 422 citing Connell 1987). The authors explain that they “designated the girls in these interviews as ‘empowered’ because they engaged in the kind of reflexivity that enabled them to challenge a femininity based on girls’ looks and approval from boys” (p.421).

This definition of empowerment thus differs from the way the participants in Malson et al.’s study, who defined empowerment as being authentically self-pleasing, used the

term. Currie et al.'s definition of empowerment focusses on engagement in reflexivity and challenging a particular version of femininity prevalent in the participating girls' school.

By labelling the critically reflecting geeks as empowered, and other girls performing emphasized femininity as 'popular', Currie et al. position the popular girls as 'not empowered'. In this study the definition of empowerment was thus explicitly the analyst's definition. Defining empowerment in this way that encompasses critical reflection, allows the term to be applied to people who arguably do not have much power over themselves and others.

Currie et al. cite Jones' (1993) argument that girls cannot be seen as choosing between being oppressed by gendered conventions or being liberated from femininity, but rather as choosing between being deemed 'weird' or 'different', or 'OK' and 'normal' by their peers (p. 422). Considering that being deemed weird is here associated with marginalisation, a third definition of empowerment is possible. Arguably, within a school setting, the girls labelled popular have more actual power to designate who is OK and normal, as opposed to being an outsider and weird, than do those on the margins.

Rather than get into a discussion of which definition of empowerment is best, it is worth considering the extent to which the girls in the study by Currie et al. could be said to have chosen to take up a position as either geek or popular. Keeping the variable definitions of empowerment in mind, it is an interesting question as to what enabled some girls and not others to take up positions of popular or positions that were considered marginal within their school context. It is quite likely that how the girls were already positioned by others will have impacted on their abilities to reject or embrace emphasised femininity or an identity as geek. Presumably it is not an option for all girls

equally to identify as geek and be accepted as belonging within the group whom Currie et al. considered empowered.

The ability to reflect critically on “a femininity based on girls’ looks and approval by boys” (p.421) may not always be interpreted as ‘empowerment’ by women and girls themselves. Gill (2012) points out that in research she was conducting at the time with Tiina Vares and Sue Jackson into New Zealand girl’s media literacy, they found that the girls in their study did not feel better or more empowered for being able to deconstruct media representations of gender. On the contrary, knowing how it all worked, while still having to live up to the representations of beauty they were exposed to, made them feel even more trapped (Gill, 2012, p. 740). The girls apparently draw on conflicting discourses, simultaneously requiring them to dismiss and live up to beauty ideals. For these girls, ‘empowerment’ does not necessarily follow from an ability to reflect critically on girls’ position in the world.

It might, of course, be argued that these girls *are* more empowered, even as they ‘feel worse’ for it and they feel powerless, depending on whether ‘empowerment’ is conceptualised as an ability to critically reflect, a feeling of having power, or having much actual power over one’s conditions. It is worth noting, however, that these are mainly individualised definitions, pertaining to the person, allowing discussions of which individual girls may be described as empowered and which may not, which suggests ‘empowerment’ is often used as a description of personal characteristics, rather than a description of conditions of girls’ and women’s lives more broadly. However, while debates over what constitutes empowerment are both useful and important, it is also clear that ‘empowerment’ is now part of the vocabulary for discussing the lives of women and girls. It is therefore important to consider what the term does, in other words, what the function and achievements of using the term are.

Approaching ‘empowerment’ in discursive terms, opens up possibilities for considering what labelling someone ‘empowered’ does. For example, it is sometimes used to justify practices that others consider oppressively objectifying, such as in a current argument over whether or not pole-dancing demonstrations should be included in a ‘Take Back The Night’ event in Ontario (Murphy, 2016) <http://www.feministcurrent.com/2016/09/18/pole-dancing-perpetuates-sexism/>). My interest here is in how the term is used and to do what, rather than a concern with who could appropriately be labelled empowered and when.

### **3.2.1.3 Debates over ‘Agency’ and ‘Choice’**

Alongside ambiguities over the meaning of the term, many discussions of women’s ‘empowerment’ are linked to debates over ‘agency’ and ‘choice’, especially choices relating to sex acts, sexiness and dress.

American psychologists Sharon Lamb and Zoe. D. Peterson (2011) explore the concept of empowerment by working through four hypothetical scenarios of a teenage girl deciding whether or not to participate in sex. They focus on the girl’s agency in these scenarios and describe how she might get a sense of empowerment and how this might count as sexual empowerment according to various definitions. With a similar focus on agency, Dutch researchers Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen (2006) analyse public debates around girls’ dress, particularly headscarves and G-strings, and argue that “both conservative and liberal discourses end up denying the female subjects their agency and autonomy” (p. 114). Thus ‘agency’ appears to be a crucial element of empowerment, in both examples, if not treated as identical to it. Yet, as Nicola Gavey points out in her discussion in relation to a feminine sexual practice of faking orgasms, “it can be seen...as agentic without therefore being empowering” (Gavey, 2011, p. 3) and, citing Donaghue et al. “while women can choose to act in various “raunchy” ways...they do not have control over meanings ascribed to those actions by others.” (Donaghue et al.,

2011, cited in Gavey, 2011, p. 4.) These authors therefore challenge the notion that agentic action is evidence of empowerment.

Other complications around ‘agency’ and ‘choice’ are indicated by the findings from Australian psychologists Avelie Stuart and Ngaire Donaghue (2011) in their study of young women’s engagements with beauty practices. Using a feminist poststructuralist framework to analyse focus group interviews with 15 women between 18 and 42 years old, Stuart and Donaghue aimed to investigate the hidden influences of ideology in women’s choices. They found that while conformity was construed as easy and non-conformity as difficult, the women also spoke of engaging in small acts of resistance which, according to the authors, “allowed” the women to conform in other ways. For example, one woman talked about shaving her legs, but pointed out she did not ‘wear the shoes’ as evidence of resistance to some beauty practices (p. 116). Stuart and Donaghue’s finding that the women compromised by adopting a position “that allowed them to retain some evidence of their resistance to external pressures and still be socially acceptable” (p116) is interesting. Stuart and Donaghue demonstrate how this enabled the women to avoid any need to critique pressures to conform, but arguably it also points to a societal demand to be seen to resist some societal pressures.

Such a demand may also be discerned in Amy Shield Dobson’s (2012) analysis of young Australian women’s self-representations and self-acceptance on the social communication network MySpace. Her analysis indicated a trend among young women to present themselves online as shamelessly self-accepting and dismissive of any viewers’ potentially negative judgements of them. Similarly, Amanda Rossi (2012) studied the comments sections under YouTube videos in which young women had asked others to comment on their appearance. She found a strong theme of commenters encouraging the girls to ‘just be yourself’ and advising the girl to not care about the opinions of others. The findings of these two analyses suggest that young women often present themselves as not caring about what others may think



of their appearance, and that if young women present themselves as if they do care, they are advised to be impervious to the opinions of others.

These research studies suggest that the performance of ‘empowerment’, ‘agency’ and ‘choice’ currently form elements of acceptable femininity, and it is also desirable for young women to present themselves as not caring about conventions or social expectations or other people's opinions.

#### **3.2.1.4 Conditions of Possibility**

Empowerment, sexualisation, agency and choice can all be conceptualised as phenomena that are constituted and enacted in specific historical contexts. This raises the question of the “conditions of possibility” (Foucault, 1982, cited in Ringrose, 2011) linked to these concepts. The conditions of possibility can be thought of as preconditions that make various discourses available and acceptable or, in other words, the ‘truths’ of a given time and place that define what can be said and done.

According to Currie et al. (2006), their participants were able to take up alternative ways of doing girlhood (that is, instead of emphasized femininity) by referencing discourses like “girls can do whatever they want, if they put their minds to it” (p. 433). Such discourses can be seen to warrant girls making the most of the possibilities offered in contemporary societies in which women have achieved equality (according to one representation of contemporary societies). An alternative interpretation is that such discourses foreclose any recognition of inequality. It might also be possible that these girls were able to reject some conventional versions of femininity by more closely aligning themselves with other versions of the postfeminist female subject outlined by McRobbie (2009) (see Chapter 1), for example, as ‘top girls’ in the field of education.

Similarly, while the women in Malson et al.’s (2011) study critiqued the “midriff” images as a “masquerade of equality”, they did so in terms of dismissing the alleged control, independence and self-pleasing of the “midriff”. When they dismissed sexiness

that looked too “man-pleasing” as unappealing, on the grounds of not being genuinely self-pleasing, their language suggests their critique of some representations of femininity was enabled by drawing on other representations of desirable femininity. They were able to dismiss a particular man-pleasing version of ‘sexiness’ that could otherwise be interpreted as a requirement of young women today, by drawing on another currently idealised aspect of femininity, that of the empowered young woman who pleases herself, rather than a man. Critiques of some versions of desirable femininity was possible for these women as they could draw on another idealised construction of young womanhood today.

### **3.3 Evading ‘victimhood’**

#### **3.3.1 Researchers Evading ‘Victimhood’**

In this section, I will discuss the contrast drawn by some researchers, between young women being agentic or victims. For example, in the introduction to their study, Currie et al. (2006) took issue with earlier research treating girls as “victims” of girlhood (p. 419). In their own words, they therefore wanted to focus on girls’ agency and “how girls are active creators of girlhood” (p. 420).

Rebecca Stringer (2014) argues that even among feminists there appears to be a consensus that ‘victim’ “calls forth a reviled subject: woman as powerless victim of domination” (p. 5). She points out that this view of women is incompatible with a postfeminist idea of women as empowered and self-determiningly agentic, and that postmodern feminists likewise reject the notion that “women are powerless as such” (Allen, 1998, cited in Stringer).

There does appear to be a trend in research on young women, first, to show them as agentic, assuming agency equals empowerment and, second, to avoid positioning any

woman as a victim (see e.g. Duits and van Zoonen, 2006, Lamb and Peterson, 2011). Baker (2010) found young women employing a variety of discursive strategies to evade ‘victimhood’. In the same way, much research focusses on agency, arguably as a move away from earlier research framing women as always already powerless and inagentic victims. While this development towards a focus on women and girls as agentic actors in their own lives is positive, it is important not to lose sight of constraints and difficulties experienced by women. It is also important not to discuss agency, choice or victimhood only on an individual basis, as if these concepts were personal characteristics rather than social positions.

### **3.3.2 Victimhood as personality deficit**

In her book ‘Framing the rape victim: Gender and agency reconsidered’, Carine M Mardorossian, (2014) analyses how the term ‘victim’ has played a role in ennobling notions of agency that valorise autonomy and support masculine notions of (American) selfhood. Through analyses of language used by the media and politicians in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York, she found the term ‘victim’ denounced in favour of the word ‘heroes’ to describe both the US as a nation and people, such as firefighters, who were personally affected by these events. Through this and analyses of rape trials widely reported at the time, she found that

“agency and victimization are conceptualized in opposition to one another, and the presence of one automatically implies the absence of the other. Agency is valorized as a mark of self-reliance, resistance, and moral worth, a valorization that is increasingly enabled today through the devaluation of victimhood’s association with passivity” (p. 32)

An impression of victims as inagentic, non-choosing, vulnerable and dependent is emerging. The term is presented as self-evidently undesirable. In another example, this is very clearly illustrated in this sub-heading from SlutWalk London!’s home page: “We

are not victims. We were victims, for a moment in time. Now, we are survivors.”

Similarly, the women interviewed by Baker (2010), classified by her as disadvantaged due to socio-economic constraints, repudiated victimhood as associated with “self-pity, insufficient personal drive and a lack of personal responsibility for one’s own life” (p. 190). In these uses, victimhood appears to be associated with an enduring “personality” which will be consistent and persist across contexts, rather than being a status applicable to specific situations or a consequence of the operation of external forces.

Different associations with the category of victim are possible. Baker cites Gill’s (2007) argument that young women today are misleadingly endowed liberally with choice and agency by a “post-feminist sensibility” that represent them as “above influence and beholden to no-one” (p.188), and links victimhood with difficult circumstances, exploitation, constraint and disadvantage.

### **3.3.3 Dilemmas and Situated Talk**

The previous section discussed a contrast between inagentic, passive and weak victims, and active, choosing, strong and empowered women, but the distinction is not as clear-cut as it can seem. Looking at how agency, strength and victimhood can be variously enacted and interpreted across various contexts, can complicate understandings of these concepts. On the other hand, discursive constructions of certain practices as ‘empowering’ and ‘chosen’ may foreclose possibilities for construing certain situations as dilemmatic or undesirable. This section will review research which addresses these points.

The significance of situational context for what people can say and do is highlighted in a study by the psychologist Alison Mackiewicz (2011). She found in interviews with young working class women in the UK that they said they felt they had to “dress like a slut” if they wanted to go out, and they also said they needed to drink alcohol to get the confidence to do so. This may be an indication that these young women were aware of

the social desirability of distancing oneself from a certain image through their style of dressing (i.e. not to dress like 'a slut'), but simultaneously felt under pressure to dress that way. It is possible, that the activity of “going out”, involves particular sets of social rules, or scripts, which may not be easily reconciled with critiques of media representations of young women. It is also possible that what young women do in the context of going out is different to what they say they will (e.g. in Malson et al.’s study). Language must always be considered in its context of use. These are not questions that are easily illuminated through individual or group interviews outside the social context of “going out”. They highlight the difficulty in defining any instances of talk or actions as unambiguously and undilemmatically ‘agentic’, ‘empowering’ or ‘chosen’.

### **3.2.4 Critiques of antivictimism**

This section has shown that ‘victimhood’ can be conceptualised in various ways, from Mardorossian’s specific focus on victims of rape to the women interviewed by Baker who discursively avoid victimhood by emphasising ‘choice’ in their talk. How the terms ‘victim’ and ‘victimhood’ are employed or even avoided in talk matters beyond individual stories of potentially ‘victimising’ experiences. Some more recent work challenges views of ‘victimhood’ and ‘victims’ as undesirable opposites of ‘agency’ and people capable of acting agentially. For example, The American political theorist Alyson M. Cole analyses the politics of “the cult of true victimhood ” (2007), where victimhood is construed as individual purity whereby some victims become construed as ‘not true victims’, and argues that making victimhood a question of individual character dismisses possibilities for marginalised or oppressed groups to fight collectively.

Taking a different critical position, Stringer (2014) suggests that the notion of ‘woman as victim’ has been critiqued since the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism.

She introduces the term ‘neoliberal victim theory’ to describe “the rhetoric and motifs of conservative anti-victimism”, thus “foregrounding the role of neoliberal values in contemporary anti-victim discourse” (p. 6). In other words, Stringer construes anti-victim feminism as a neoliberal version of feminism that focusses problematically on individual responsibilities rather than collective politics and structural change. Stringer also cites Rosemary Hennessey’s (2000) claim that it is as important to analyse the growing neoliberal ‘ways of knowing’ as to analyse the impact of neoliberal programmes of structural adjustment and the resultant growing inequality and upwards distribution of wealth. Citing David Harvey’s view that ‘neoliberalism has become hegemonic as a mode of discourse’ (2005, cited in Stringer 2014, p.8), she argues that the category ‘victim’ is a significant example of a neoliberal way of knowing.

### **3.4 Required Empowerment and 3-pronged contradictions**

#### **3.4.1 Contradictions or triple bind**

Rosalind Gill (2012) found that despite girls being media literate and able to critically deconstruct media images and messages, media representations still made them “feel bad” and “long to look in a particular way” and in some cases, “having the knowledge made them feel even more trapped” (p. 740). This finding suggests that there is a real risk of “a double fail”: failing to live up to media representations of what young women should look like and do, and failing to live up to perceived feminist demands to reject media imposed normativities. It appears that for some girls and young women, while they can critique media representations, there is a perception that they still have to live up to them, while simultaneously having to reject them.

As shown by Gill, women are often aware of fashion/media-pressures to look a certain way, and they know they should not “fall” for this. However, they also believe that it is their individual responsibility to resist such external pressures. If a woman is seen as

“giving in” to external pressures, she is open to being positioned as “weak” and a victim (such as a fashion-*victim*) which must be avoided. A further contradiction in relation to fashion is that she should simultaneously embody empowered sexiness. One of the challenges faced by women may lie precisely in their being hailed as “women of capacity” (McRobbie, 2008a) and *not* social dupes, as if they can exist entirely separately from social pressures and their social contexts while at the same time occupying them fully.

In relation to bodies, appearances and femininity, there thus appears to be a triple and potentially contradictory demand between a demand to avoid victim-hood and a demand to resist social pressures *and* a demand to be sexy. Thus, it appears acceptable to ridicule someone who fulfils the sexy ideal as an empty-headed social dupe (as for example, some participants in Malson et al.’s study spoke of ‘the midriff’ as empty headed), although women are simultaneously under pressure to be sexy and simultaneously cannot easily claim victimisation by social pressures without negative consequences. Young women have to be careful to meet some aspects of beauty ideals but without looking as if they are striving to live up to beauty ideals. Furthermore, they cannot easily speak of difficult circumstances without risking being positioned as a victim. As victimhood is often constructed as opposite of agency, and agency is involved in empowerment, to speak of difficulties may make it very difficult to identify with the representation of the empowered ideal young women today.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter, I reviewed Giddens’ ideas that people today have to forge their own biographies. In this present or late modern context, individuals are brought into being as ‘choosing subjects’, producing their biographies via choices they make, or at the very least construe their biographies as if they were consequences of

‘choices’ made. ‘Choice’ thus becomes a key concept for being a person in ‘the present’. Other academics, such as Rose, argue that people do not freely choose their biographies, but do emphasize that at the moment people present themselves as if they were free.

Choice has received critique from feminist scholars as well. Budgeon draws attention to how choice feminism tends to celebrate choice for its own sake, rather than focus on what is being chosen and the consequences of choices.

Choice often appears in relation to the concepts of agency and empowerment. These concepts have likewise been investigated and critiqued, and there is disagreement over the meanings of empowerment. Agency is likewise critiqued, as some scholars argue that agentically choosing something does not guarantee empowerment, nor does choosing something in and of itself mean that there are not pressures and restrictions around what women choose. Stuart and Donaghue’s finding that some women allow themselves to engage in some beauty practices by demonstrating resistance to others, suggest there is pressure on young women to be seen as if they are resisting social pressures.

Agency is furthermore often constructed as the antithesis of victimhood, and victimhood is often avoided as it implies a lack of agency. There is considerable pressure on young women to avoid victimhood, regardless of how difficult their circumstances may be.

These various pressures, to look a certain way in accordance with beauty ideals, to be seen as resistant to social pressures, and a pressure to avoid victimhood produce a potentially difficult and possibly contradictory ‘terrain’ for young women to navigate. If they appear to comply too much with beauty ideals and practices they risk being positioned as empty headed, or a victim of social pressures. If they voice having problems with societal demands, either in relation to beauty ideals or in relation to



difficulties with social or economic circumstances, they risk being positioned as an inagentic victim, an identity that does not easily comply with current representations of young women as empowered. Consequently, this study investigates how young women negotiate constructions of young womanhood today and which constraints and possibilities arise from such constructions.

## Chapter 4 Methodology

This thesis adopts a broadly social constructionist and discursive psychological perspective, conceptualizing identities as constructed and continually negotiated in talk and interactions. This perspective derives from a critical discursive psychology approach (Wetherell, 1998, Edley, 2001) that sees the subject and subjectivity as constituted in discourse, thereby emphasizing the subject as *psychosocial* rather than only psychological. In other words, it shifts the focus from the individual, to the wider social and cultural contexts. The discursive approach to the psychosocial is concerned with analysing how subjectivities are constituted in social contexts through pre-existing and ever changing pools of meaning (Taylor, 2015). In this chapter, I develop the perspective and analytic approach which I adopt in the research presented in this thesis, In the first section of this chapter, I briefly outline the critical discursive approach to the subject, subjectification and positioning in greater detail. I then move on, in the second part, to address some critiques of the discursive approach, mainly its alleged shortcomings in not being able to move beyond spoken or written language. I argue that discursive methods can be used to analyse phenomena other than language, as meanings of other phenomena are negotiated with language and, furthermore, phenomena such as action, movement, appearance and so on can be analysed by discursive methods. This is particularly relevant as the datasets used in this study consists of vlogs (short videos uploaded by the makers themselves to YouTube) as well as semi-structured interviews with young women. In this section I also address ‘the turn to affect’ as a critique of perceived shortcomings of discourse analysis and consider its implications for my own analytic approach. In the third section, I discuss vlogs in greater detail, before ending this chapter by outlining how discursive methods may be expanded to allow analysis of such visual material. This involves an expansion of Morison and Macleod’s (2013) Butlerian adaptation of Taylor and Littleton’s (2006) narrative-discursive method, to

allow analysis of appearance and performance in vlogs. The analytic approach I develop therefore builds on earlier work in the critical discursive psychology tradition in order to develop an approach to the analysis of a dataset of audiorecorded interviews and vlogs.

## **4.1 The discursive approach in Psychology**

### **4.1.1 The Subject, Subjectification and Positioning**

My analytical thinking is informed by a Foucauldian conceptualization of the ‘subject’, which considers subjects to be produced in discourse (e.g. Hall, 2001, Wetherell, 1998). Here, ‘subjects’ are seen as constituted within discursive formations of knowledges and power, and come to understand themselves within such regimes of truth, which in turn are specific to their cultural and historic locations.

There is some debate over the extent to which Foucault’s notion of subjectification should be interpreted as foreclosing any possibilities of challenging prevailing ‘truths’ and power structures, or whether his theorization allows for slippages and new interpretations.

Although I share the latter view, my concern here is not with how best to interpret Foucault. Rather, from a Foucauldian starting point, I also take from Michael Billig (1997) an interest in discourse in use, and the possibilities that arise from people’s active engagement in sense-making and the dilemmatic nature of common-sense ideologies.

From Bronwyn Davies & Rom Harré (1990), I take the notion of positioning as more dynamic than a subject position. In their formulation, the concept of ‘positioning’ captures both how people take up subject positions and how they are positioned by others. It also captures how speakers and hearers may use discursive practices to negotiate new positions.

In this study, I also consider subjects constituted in action, as well as discourse in the traditional sense of talk and text. I thus take a wider view of discourse to include what people do, their body movements and appearance. For young people living with social media in Britain today, this ‘doing’ includes performing, watching or responding to vlogs as a part of the constituted world in which they are functioning. The talk, actions and appearances performed in vlogs are here included in a wider understanding of discourse.

#### **4.1.2 Challenging Subjectifying Power-Structures.**

In 2008, Ian Burkitt argued that people’s everyday lives are shaped by the power relations of neoliberal capitalism which ‘subject’ them both as workers and consumers (p. 236). However, Burkitt rejects Foucault’s notion of subjectivity, arguing that it does not allow for agency or account for how subjects can change relations of power.

According to Burkitt,

“power...is heterogeneous, embedded in the relational contexts of everyday life with its various cultures and sub-cultures, social networks and groups, out of which emerge fully-rounded, if always unfinalized, selves” (p. 242).

As a consequence, Burkitt suggests, “it could be that we are, to varying degrees, only partially the subjects of power” (p. 244). Whether this notion of power as heterogeneous challenges Foucault’s notion of power rather depends on whether we consider the alternative discourses, enabling resistance through other discursive subjectifications, as themselves subjectifying instantiations of “power”. As mentioned above, I am less concerned with arguments over the correct interpretation of Foucault’s notions of power. However, Burkitt’s highlighting that people are subjected through discourses other than those related directly to work and consumerism, and that these other discourses may be effective in dispersing and subverting the dominance of some

existing subjectifying regimes, is important and relevant to analysis of young women's lives.

The approach to subjectification adopted here is that it does not only apply to top-down official power structures. While Burkitt focused on alternative discourses that challenge the subjectifications of workers, the view adopted here is that such alternative discourses are not free from power and should not be assumed to be entirely separate from the 'official' powers they are resisting. For example, some discourses and practices resisting patriarchy could be seen as carrying within them vestiges of patriarchal ways of understanding the world. An example of this relevant to my research is the SlutWalk phenomenon which, while attempting to challenge certain patriarchal views of women and women's bodies, can be seen as carrying forward others. SlutWalk has been criticized for excluding black women, older women, and bodies that do not match current beauty standards, and for promoting an idea of women as always sexual (e.g. Brison, 2011; Dines and Murphy, 2011), while also promoting the idea that women always own their own bodies and challenging the idea that women are ever blame for being raped.

Subjectifying powers and resistance therefore should not be seen in simple terms as opposites, but as instantiations of people who are partially the subjects of some kinds of power, while simultaneously also taking up subject positions of resistance within other power/knowledge complexes. The implications of these arguments are that any alternative discursive resources drawn upon, which fragment, destabilize and challenge some processes of subjectifications can themselves be implicated with other subjectifying processes.

For the young women I studied, many of whom are not in employment, it is highly relevant to analyse the processes of subjectification operating in the ways they talk about themselves and their lives. Assuming that subjects are brought into being through

subjectifying processes, and consequently that some subject positions are more desirable than others, it is highly pertinent to consider what is opened up and closed down by the positioning which takes place in women's talk. As Burkitt's argument highlights the heterogeneity of power and its embeddedness in everyday life, it becomes pertinent to analyse which subjectifications are evident, and with which effects, especially for people who are not primarily subject to top-down power relations of employment but who can nonetheless not be considered outside power structures.

#### **4.1.3 Wetherell's Concepts of 'Personal Order' and 'Discursive Apprenticeships'**

One critique levelled at discursive conceptualizations of subjectivity is that they fail to account for why people differ in the subject positions they take up. Many authors look to psychodynamics to answer this question (e.g. Henriques, Urwin, Hollway, Venn and Walkerdine 1984). Wendy Hollway (e.g. 1984), taking a psychodynamic approach, looks at personal histories to account for investment in certain subject positions. Her work highlights the need for subjectivity theorists to be able to account for differences in the ways people take up subject positions, and addresses this through personal histories. Margaret Wetherell (2003, 2007) also argues for the relevance of people's personal histories, but rather than using the term 'investment', with its psychoanalytical implications, she uses the concept 'personal order'. She argues that

“...over time particular routines, repetitions, procedures and modes of practice build up to form personal style, psycho-biography and life history and become a guide for how to go on in the present.” (Wetherell, 2007, p. 668).

This personal order is thus developed through 'the growing child's various discursive apprenticeships' (2003, p115). In this view, people's different histories are relevant to the take up of subject positions but without reference to inner psychic explanations.

Furthermore, viewing discursive apprenticeships as ongoing can account for changes in the way people 'tell' themselves and developments in 'personal order'. Some discursive approaches expand the notion of discursive apprenticeships beyond childhood to view identity as an open-ended ongoing process (e.g. Taylor, 2007, Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Such a conceptualization of identity accounts for consistencies and changes in people's patterns of behaviour as their discursive resources develop and their contexts change. The concept of 'personal order' in Wetherell's and especially Taylor's use, leaves room for more flexibility than psychodynamic approaches, as discursive apprenticeships do not end at an unspecified time in childhood. By conceptualising identity in terms of on-going processes, such approaches are less rigid and static than an account utilizing psychodynamic explanatory principles.

#### **4.1.4 Being Positioned by Others**

A further issue that needs to be considered in relation to why people position themselves as they do, and the affective loading attached to different positions, relates to what constitutes the 'availability' of subject positions. Arguably, merely being aware of the existence of alternative discourses and different ways that people can position themselves within the discourses is not sufficient to make a position available, regardless of what such positioning might enable in either psychological or social terms. This is because it is not only an individual's 'choice' which positions them in available discourses. Not only do other discourses surrounding ways of, for example, performing femininity have to be available and familiar enough to be 'doable', they also have to be do-able in terms of being supported in a wider interactive or community context, because discourses and positions within them are not the property of individuals. Furthermore, people do not start from a neutral point of free choice from available subject positions, but are always already positioned. In addition, not all identities are equally available to everybody; As people are already positioned by others, they cannot

simply adopt an identity that others may consider inconsistent with how they have been positioned previously.

For example, it is likely that the label ‘geek’ adopted by the girls in Currie et al.’s study discussed in Chapter 3, was not equally available to all girls because certain criteria had to be met to ‘qualify’ for this label, such as being recognized by others as educationally able and having shared interests with the ‘geek’ group (rather than, for example, ‘the populars’ in the study). As ‘geek’ is a recognized ‘type’ of person, arguably especially in an educational environment, it seems likely these girls were already positioned as such, and positioned as ‘not a popular’, by others in the school setting.

#### **4.1.5 Trouble in Identity Work**

When considering why people take up certain subject positions, it is also important to consider why they do not position themselves differently. It seems possible that people often position themselves in ways that seem most consistent with how they have been positioned before. This occurs not only because such positioning is familiar, as part of their personal order, so they know how to ‘go on in the present’, but also because too much perceived inconsistency may be challengeable by others. Taylor (2007), citing Wetherell (1998), uses the term ‘trouble’ in identity work to describe such challengeable identities, a term that may also be applied to socially undesirable positions. As ‘trouble’ prompts repair (Taylor, 2007) and requires work for people’s account of themselves to be heard as intelligible and socially acceptable, avoiding trouble should be included in considerations of why people take up certain positions.

#### **4.2 Criticisms and limitations of the discursive approach**

Discursive approaches have been criticized for not being able to capture experiences outside talk and text (see Wetherell, 2012). Discursive analyses are thus sometimes



criticized as being unable to analyze data other than text (e.g. visual data) or engage with embodied aspects of being (Taylor, 2015). This study proposes that it is pertinent to consider other aspects and expressions of meaning in people's lives, such as appearance and embodied performances. Furthermore, recent years has seen what we can call 'a turn to affect', regarded by some researchers as a move away from discourse, and by others more as a potential extension of the remit of discursive approaches.

#### **4.2.1 More than talk**

The critique that discursive approaches do not take account of phenomena considered by some to be extra-discursive can be countered using Gergen's (1985) argument that the material world is experienced through meaning systems of which language is a large part. Therefore, studying language allows us to study how the meanings of, for example, bodily experiences are negotiated. Taylor (2015), citing Parker (2013), acknowledges that language is not the only "semiotically structured phenomenon" (p11). Others include movement, visual images or sound. However, Taylor argues that these phenomena cannot be considered as completely separate to language use; an analysis must consider language and other phenomena together.

In this thesis, I consider the use of visual media and the appearance and bodily movements of women in vlogs as communicative practices that are another aspect of discourse than spoken language. My approach assumes that because the meanings of bodies and appearance are communicated and negotiated in a combination of language and visual discourses, studying either language or the visual communications separately becomes insufficient. The study will illustrate the potential of including other communicative practices in our analyses.

#### **4.2.2 The Analytic Approach of this Thesis**

Building on the analytical concepts of 'interpretative repertoires', 'subject positions' and 'ideological dilemmas' from critical discursive psychology (Edley, 2001), I

investigate how young women take up wider societal representations of femininity.

Subject positions in Edley's words are "locations within a conversation. They are the identities made relevant by specific ways of talking" (p. 210). Ideological dilemmas are "lived ideologies...that, unlike their intellectual counterparts... are characterized by inconsistency, fragmentation and contradiction" (p.203). While Nigel Edley explains interpretative repertoires as "any community's common sense" (p198), I will be using the wider Foucauldian understanding of discourses to include activities and resources additional to talk.

As I am including vlogs (videos) in my study, visual and embodied elements are part of the data I analyze. I understand these as part of the discursive resources available to, and drawn upon, by young women. The analysis examines the language used by young women and girls, by looking at the discursive resources that make certain options available, including to critique media images and account for non-'fashion/beauty-complex' compliant modes of performing femininity (see McRobbie 2009, p.69), and it examines the subject positions made available within these. In addition, the analysis considers what young female vloggers do with the visual media of vlogs. Analyzing data that combine talk and visual data presents its own challenges, and these will be discussed in detail in Section 3 of this chapter.

### **4.2.3 On 'The Turn to Affect'**

It is often unclear what exactly different writers mean by the term 'affect'. While some use it largely to mean 'emotion', (e.g. Ahmed, 2004, cited in Bissenbakker Frederiksen, 2012; Wetherell, 2012), others, such as Brown and Tucker (2010), use it to refer to 'new possibilities of relatedness'(p.236). Bissenbakker Frederiksen (2012) divides these two

approaches into two separate tendencies or schools of thought. One, inspired by Deleuze and Massumi, conceptualises affect as pre-discursive and unpredictable potentialities, outside power structures. The other conceptualises affect largely as emotion, paying close attention to the way emotions are intertwined with social categories, meaning making and power structures. The second is Bissenbakker's own approach, and he gives the example of the need to always interpret emotions such as 'aggression' or 'nurturance' in relation to their historical uses, especially in relation to gender categories, and gendered power structures. This latter conceptualisation of affect is thus compatible with analyses using discursive approaches.

Conceptualising affect as 'more' than emotion seems to afford some writers a hope and promise of as yet unpredicted possibilities. However, most analyses still rely on analysing discourse in accessing affect. While claiming discursive methodologies have no shortcomings at all would clearly be naïve, it will be more fruitful to look at what else discursive approaches may do, rather than abandoning all discursive methodology. Arguably, discourse analysis has now come of age (Wetherell 2012), and it is possible to stretch what we will allow ourselves to do with it, such as include a focus on talk about emotions and the doing of affect. The turn to affect can fruitfully be seen as allowing, or enabling, the extension of the remit of discursive analyses.

What discursive analyses can take from the turn to affect is a focus on how the personal, political, private, public, rational and emotional are discursively linked and have performative functions. This seems to have particular potential for analyses attending to raced, gendered and/or classed possibilities and constraints. An example would be analyses of the way 'the angry black woman' as a trope sometimes gets invoked in talk to silence black women's voices, or the way tropes of 'bitter, ugly, jealous women' may be invoked to silence women complaining about sexual objectification of women's bodies. Similarly, Snyder (2014) reports that in work-related performance reviews

men's and women's similar behaviours and ways of talking are interpreted differently, so what is deemed assertive in men is described as abrasive or shrill in women.

Lawrence Grossberg (2010) talks about affect as a 'structure of feeling' and raises the question of 'where you can and cannot invest'. While discursive approaches may not be able to make an argument that certain people *cannot* invest in given subject positions, we can look at what people do with emotion in talk, and which emotions appear to be done in relations to talk about bodies, experiences, wishes and desires and so on.

As an example, Sidsel Braedder analysed talk about fat bodies in a TV documentary about two women undergoing gastric bypass operations. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's notion of 'stickiness', her analysis saw the fat body as being stuck to exclusion and death via talk about the emotion of fear. Fear metonymically linked the fat body with death, excluding a possibility of investing emotions such as 'love' in the fat body (Braedder, in Bissenbakker, 2012). Jean McAvoy's (2015) analysis of affective-discursive practices in relation to a woman's 'failed attempts to control body weight' (p.22) likewise explicates how what she terms affective practices are imbued with macro ideologies that co-constitute subjectivities. Similarly, when Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton (2012) argue in their work on creative workers, that these workers

“... would be subjected less to directly imposed, external and 'top down' pressures (although these may also exist) than to a regime of self-discipline motivated by learned assumptions about what is normal or desirable”,

these learned assumptions about what is normal and desirable should not be seen as externally imposed additions to what those workers somehow feel 'underneath', but as their actual desires shaped by learned assumption.

Looking at emotion discursively, we may begin to tease out some of the ways in which certain subject positions and emotions become linked, making some of these positions

and affective practices more readily available and accessible to certain people at certain times than others. If we thus see 'the personal as political', we may argue for extending analyses to include attention to emotion in discursive work on power relations, by looking at how emotion may exert some indirect control over groups of people. Likewise, from this point of view, emotion must necessarily be analysed discursively, rather than going with a school of thought that sees emotion as pre-discursive and arguably does not focus sufficiently on which emotional, or affective, practices are available to whom.

While other methodological approaches may be useful in other research projects with different foci, in work concerned with possibilities and constraints for young women (or for that matter any other group) the usefulness of the turn to affect is its focus on the discursive work affect can do, and is used to do. Thus the turn to affect should not so much be seen as a turn away from anything, be it 'the discursive turn', queer theory, or any other 'turn', but rather a potentially useful extension.

### **4.3 Beyond text: Working with vlogs**

Technological developments now allow people, and young adults in particular, to constantly communicate with others, and be immersed in social networks online, both when away from social institutions such as work, university or families of origin and while physically present in these locations. In recent years, academics have started studying the role of social media networks in young people's lives (Dobson, 2012; Livingstone, 2008). While most of the focus to date has been on girls' use of Myspace and Bebo, researchers are also turning their attention to YouTube (Simonsen, 2012).

### **4.3.1 What are vlogs?**

#### **4.3.1.1 YouTube and Vlogs**

An article in The Observer (Lewis, 7 April 2013) described how YouTube was taking over from traditional television, and ‘YouTuber’ was now a recognised category amongst young people. Readers were informed that if we underestimate YouTube, this is a sure sign we are middle-aged! Arguably, cyberspace is now a significant site for young people’s identities and identity performances. However, while other social networks, e.g. blogs and young people’s activities on bebo and MySpace have been researched, we are only within the last few years beginning to see research on vlogs.

A ‘Vlog’ (video-log) is a short video (usually between 3 and 10 minutes long) uploaded by the maker herself to YouTube. The clips involve the maker, in my selected examples a young woman, talking to a camera about a subject of her choosing. The terminology for people who do this is ‘YouTubers’ or ‘Vloggers’. Vlogs vary considerably in sophistication. While some look ‘professional’ and are of very high technical quality, others are simply a vlogger speaking to a webcam, with minimal editing involved. The medium of the vlog itself is relatively new, and although young people use it extensively, as viewers and producers, researchers are arguably trailing behind; Myspace and Bebo are hardly used anymore, while Facebook is viewed by many young people as being a medium for older generations.

#### **4.3.1.2 How researchers have used vlogs**

While some researchers (e.g. Young & Burrows (2013)) use YouTube vlog content as data without much discussion of the role of the source of the data, other researchers (e.g. Raun (2014), Simonsen (2012) and Anarbaeva (2011)) analyse the medium of YouTube, and vlogs in particular, in greater detail and argue that vlogs and vlogging constitute a particular site of identity construction with different possibilities and with additional functions than other sites of self-presentation and talk.

In his study of identity formation on YouTube, Thomas Mosebo Simonsen (2012)

argues that the large amount of videos uploaded to YouTube

“reveals an underlying aspect of modern identity. That is the articulation of the self in public ...It is a more direct and much more widespread mode of visibility, where a whole generation of creators are presenting themselves in what can be considered a public performance culture.” (Simonsen, 2012, p. 2).

According to Simonsen the main audience, at the time of his study, 2012, was 18-24 year-olds. While Simonsen specifically studied the construction of mediated identities, that is, how vloggers constructed their identities, his observations of public performance culture and widespread visibility, in his analysis, pertains to modern identity in general.

In this study, the focus is not a comparison of offline vs online themes and ways of talking about them. Rather, vlogs are analysed as a different kind of material from a site that may allow and encourage other kinds of talk than that fostered by semi-structured face-to-face interviews (the other form of data used in the study) and will allow analysis of visual and bodily communicative practices.

#### **4.3.1.3 Conditions of online Possibility**

Citing Youngs (1999), Samara Anarbaeva (2011) argues in her study of how Women of Colour use beauty vlogs, that YouTube vlogging can be seen as empowering women by allowing them control over their own representation and creating online communities. She argues that YouTube allows women to express themselves in the way they want to be seen, and to reach out to others with similar circumstances. In addition, YouTube provides women with online networks that help them cope better with their conditions of existence and “provides women on online networks with a certain sense of empowerment” (Youngs, 1999, in Anarbaeva, 2011, p. 23). While we cannot know whether vlogging and YouTube communities make any women 'cope better', YouTube can arguably be seen as a site that allows women to negotiate 'conditions of possibility'

as they address particular topics, even as they also operate within the wider society and also the conventions for YouTube vlogging.

Anarbaeva argues that online communities may also be seen as a site of knowledge production where women create meaning, and meanings, and that knowledges produced here now form a significant part of the discursive context of young women's lives. Even though the present study differs from Anarbaeva's in that it considers YouTube material a part of wider social contexts (in other words, vlogs are not presumed a priori to be a separate site where alternative discourses are produced), what women talk about and how they present themselves on YouTube forms part of the wider context of constraints and possibilities for young women today.

Analysing the role of vlogs in transgender people's transitioning, Tobias Raun (2014) argues that

“The vlog seems to serve an important function in the transitioning process, and is an important part of a process of self-invention, serving as a testing ground for experimentations with, and manifestations of (new) identities.” (Raun, 2014, p.3)

It is not only transgendered people who experiment with identities and self-presentations. For example, Cote and Bynner argue that early adulthood is a time for playing with and experimenting with one's identity. Raun argues for trans vloggers that

“Making vlogs and watching other people's vlogs becomes a visual as well as a narrative map for Erica and the other trans vloggers, enabling self-construction and self- reflection as trans.” (Raun, 2014, p9).

This may also be the case for other identifications, where people who watch and produce vlogs become enmeshed in a story-telling community which enables construction of oneself as a particular kind of person, as represented in the vlog.



Following these sources, I propose that the existence of story-telling formats, and formats for particular activities and topics on YouTube, such as make-up tutorials, diaries and feminist commentary, allows for, and creates, spaces where particular aspects of young women's identities may be put forward, which might not be told in that way offline, or outside a personal vlog. For example, in face-to-face interviews with me, the young women participants emphasise their resistances to social pressures such as wearing make-up. However, different orientations are perhaps invited by a community of beauty vloggers who assume their audiences are interested in make-up tutorials. Thus, off-line and on-line settings may encourage different orientations to constraints and possibilities for performing femininity, while possibilities for resistance and the forms this may take may also vary between these locations.

#### **4.3.1.4 A brief note on 'authenticity'**

YouTube, as a site, pinpoints the performance-authenticity question that is also a prominent theme from the interviews. As the emergence first of reality TV and then User Generated Content (UGC) online has blurred any easy distinction between real and fake, how authenticity is performed online becomes very interesting and a relevant point for my research.

In the vlogs I analyse, there appears to be an implicit requirement to perform in ways recognisable as 'feminine'. In addition, whatever is presented in a vlog is often performed as sincere and authentic. This is achieved by the vlogger self-reflecting on the act of vlogging and performing, and drawing attention to the presence of the camera, and addressing viewers for example by asking questions and inviting comments. In addition, it appears that display of emotion can be used to signal authenticity, but this must be managed carefully, as too much emotion risks being received by audiences as 'a performance', and hence labelled fake (as indicated in the comments left by viewers underneath the vlog), which is implicitly understood to be 'wrong'. Hiding the

performative aspect or drawing attention to it seems to be among the options for staking an authenticity claim. These points indicate the need for an analytic approach to appearance and performance as features of the vlog data used in this project.

### **4.3.2 Appearance and performance in vlogs**

As vlogs typically involve the vlogger herself talking directly to the camera, the most prominent aspect of the visual element of vlogs as data is the vlogger's appearance. In making decisions about how to describe appearances and actions in vlogs, I soon became aware that the vlogger's appearance and what is shown in vlog cannot be treated as a 'neutral' 'do-nothing' phenomenon (Edwards, 1997). There was an initial temptation to interpret the appearance as different to performance, as if the appearance is passive while the performance (including speech and movement) is active doing, but while watching vlogs, it became evident that the vlogger's appearance is a crucial element of the performance. Furthermore, I realised that it is by no means simple to describe what a vlogger looks like or her actions. Such description inevitably involves attention to some details and not others and a focus on some aspects of appearance while other aspects may not be mentioned. Thus, for me to describe or refer to vloggers' appearances and actions, as well as cinematographic elements such as close-ups, lighting and setting of vlog, forms part of the analytic process, rather than being a 'neutral' description of 'reality'.

This means I am faced with two related issues. One is how to analytically incorporate visual data in the analysis, and the other is a more practical issue of how to describe the extracts I am using. As the second depends on the first, I will start by discussing my approach to data that includes visuals as well as speech, referring to descriptions of extracts in which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5..

#### 4.3.2.1 Displays of femininity

In Joanne Entwistle's sociological analysis of fashion in her book 'The Fashioned body, Fashion, Dress and Modern Social theory' (2000), she argues that clothes 'announce' our sex when people dress according to conventions of gender (p. 144). This, she argues, produces an illusion of a natural link between sex and clothes. The argument can be extended to apply to other aspects of appearance such as make-up, ways of moving etc. Gendered identity can thus be seen as produced through cultural meanings of the body, clothes, make-up, movements and poses, some of which come to be understood as 'feminine'. (In the following, I shall use the term 'femininity' to connote female gender quite broadly, rather than how it is sometimes understood as referring to a particular and narrower way of doing female gender.) While there is no given or natural link between any of these aspects and gendered identity or femininity, there is also no 'reality' behind the appearance. There is only an aggregate of cultural associations that connote 'femininity'.

Entwistle furthermore points out that dress is 'situated bodily practice' (p. 34). This means that when we dress we orient to the social norms of the spaces we expect to be moving in. She argues that while some spaces and occasions require a high degree of consciousness around dress, such as formal occasions, even when we are not attending consciously to issues around dress, we internalize rules and norms around dress 'which we routinely employ unconsciously' (p. 34). While people may thus be more or less overtly aware of requirements around dress in given situations and occasions, there are always norms around dress, even when we are not explicitly aware of them. Likewise, appearance can be said to always communicate gender, as dress, make-up and so on are interpreted within gendered norms.

In the terms of the approach I am using, drawing on Butler's theory of performativity (discussed in Chapter 2), the vloggers are *doing* femininity. This makes Dilley et al.'s

findings on occasioned ‘emphasized femininity’ (discussed in Chapter 3) useful. (In this article, in using Connell’s term ‘emphasized femininity’, they refer to a ‘femininity oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men’, p. 2). As they studied occasions when women explicitly engaged in this, their study highlighted that ‘emphasized femininity’ is best seen as something some women sometimes do, i.e. a *display* of ‘emphasized femininity’, while at other times they may not. Likewise, they suggest that ‘non-emphasized femininity’ is equally an outcome of social practice. These terms are useful in considering appearances. Although Dilley et al. do not specify what they would consider as ‘non-emphasized’ femininity, I will use that term to refer to displays of femininity that in shared cultural understandings differ explicitly from displays understood as traditionally feminine.

Shared cultural understandings allow us to view elements of dress, make-up, acts, poses and so on as cultural resources, which mark femininity variably. For example, particular items of clothing can be seen as markers of emphasized or non-emphasized femininity. For instance, high-heeled shoes may be seen as a marker of ‘emphasized femininity’, while Doc Martens shoes is an example of a marker of ‘non-emphasized’ femininity.

I do not suggest that all performances of femininity fall into either the ‘emphasised’ or ‘non-emphasized’ category but, rather, that both are displays of femininity that can be performed on occasion. (I did consider whether ‘emphasized non-femininity’ would be a better term, but this would suggest the display in question is not a way of doing femininity, which would be misleading.)

Using these terms strongly implies a third category of ‘unemphasized femininity’, where there is no emphasis on displaying versions of femininity that could be termed either ‘traditionally feminine’ or ‘not traditionally feminine’. While it is useful to bear in mind that women are not at all times displaying one of two versions of femininity, traditional or alternative (corresponding roughly to emphasised and non-emphasised

femininity), this should not be misunderstood as suggesting there is a state of not performing gender. The point is that many ways of doing femininity involve emphasizing neither 'traditional' nor 'alternative' femininity. Indeed, many performances of gender may be seen as passing themselves off as 'non-performative' neutral 'reality'.

Obviously, it is not a simple matter to analyze women's displays of femininity, as these will not always map neatly on to a particular category. Rather, it is useful to consider aspects of appearance, such as clothes, make-up, hairstyles and so on, as *markers* associated with various versions of femininity. These markers may be viewed as cultural resources available to people, that can do communicative work, in a similar way to the discursive view of language resources.

In these terms, women may display markers associated with versions of femininity, such as the types of shoe mentioned above. They may display some markers of emphasized femininity without all aspects of their appearance being categorizable in the same way. However, if they wear items and display make-up and so on that are all markers of emphasized femininity, this may be seen as a package of markers that combine and reinforce each other to produce an accentuated appearance of emphasized femininity. An example would be wearing a dress, red lipstick and high-heeled shoes together as these can be seen as cultural resources that all mark emphasized femininity and are culturally understood as feminine.

As analysis always involves drawing on shared cultural meanings, in some instances it will be possible for the analyst (myself) to claim that some markers are recognizable as traditionally feminine or not traditionally feminine. 'Recognizable' here means that there would be few challenges to the claim that these markers are respectively 'traditionally feminine' or 'not traditionally feminine'. However, it is worth noting here that not all appearances may combine markers that will be categorized in the same way,

nor will all aspects of appearance fit easily into a category. It may be more practical to consider markers of ‘emphasized’ and ‘non-emphasized’ femininity as a continuum.

This point, however, also draws attention to how appearance, and displays of femininity, emphasized or otherwise, are not fixed or stable, but may be confirmed, contested or contradicted, especially if oriented to in talk. How appearance comes up in talk is then another way appearance can become relevant in analysis. While gender is always active and inescapable, it is not a simple matter to isolate elements of talk or visual appearance because both are situated in complex contexts, where multiplicities and ‘fuzzy’ categories may be in play. However, focusing on elements as culturally understood markers allows analysis of what such markers do, that is, what they communicate, individually and within packages of markers.

#### **4.3.2.2 Performance**

As appearance is evidently part of doing gender, Tracy Morison and Catriona Macleod’s performative-performance analytical approach (2013) becomes helpful. The starting point of their article is Judith Butler’s theory of performativity which they argue has significantly contributed to theoretical debates about gender by shifting the focus from a sex/gender binary onto an emphasis on the discursive construction of sex/gender. They argue, however, that while the theory of performativity provides a rich language for thinking about gender, it offers little guidance on analysing of language use in context. To apply Butler’s concept to analysis, they suggest extending Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton’s (2006) narrative -discursive method by infusing it with Butlerian theory.

While the article outlines a method for analyzing interview data, what interests me is their suggestion that the concepts of ‘performativity’ and ‘performance’ capture different aspects of doing gender. As Morison and Macleod explain, Butler’s concept of gender as ‘performance’ has at times been interpreted as implying that people are social

dupes who cannot help but re-iterate gendered norms, and at times been taken to imply a pre-discursive subject who may intentionally engage in theatrical acts of performing gender identity. Morison and MacLeod emphasize that they are not implying a pre-discursive subject. Instead, they highlight the usefulness of the concept of 'performance' as indicating an active subject. Thus, they argue that 'it is possible to maintain the antiessentialism of performativity while developing an account of gender construction as both inter/active and performed.' (p.2)

Given the impossibility of people reciting or repeating gendered 'scripts' perfectly every time, Morison and Macleod argue that gender is disrupted because of the necessity of reciting and the impossibility of identical recitations (Lloyd, 1999, cited in Morison & Macleod, 2013). They link this bending of citations (Van Lenning 2004, in Morison & Macleod, 2013), or changes in gendered scripts, to moments of 'trouble' in discursive terms. It is then possible to see disruptions of gender in *specific* interactional moments, where *specific* enactments of gender may be troubled. Morison and Macleod's discussion therefore indicates the usefulness of conceptualizing people as active 'doers' reciting gender in specific re-enactments within particular contexts, and their focus is particularly on troubling moments, where ruptures and fissures in gendered discourses may occur.

Morison and Macleod's discussion of the extension of Taylor and Littleton's analytical framework is therefore concerned specifically with analyzing how 'norms and regulatory frames are troubled' (p.7) and how specific performances may trouble gender norms. For Morison and Macleod, the usefulness of infusing a performative-performance element into a narrative-discursive method lies in allowing them to access what they term 'the politics of narration' at 'the macro level', which refers to the normative trouble and slow bending of citations, in addition to analyzing trouble at the 'micro level' of interactional trouble. This extended analytic focus thus allows them to

attend to any 'broader political effects that narratives may have, including the subversive potential of 'incorrect' gender performances' (p. 6)

Morison and Macleod therefore argue for carefully supplementing the notion of reiterating performativity with the notion of more active subjects, implied in the concept of performance, in order to link interactional trouble with gender trouble in the Butlerian sense. In their argument, a careful view of the relationship between notions of performance and performativity allows analysts to approach subjects as active, reflexive and imaginative, without undermining the antiessentialist nature of Butler's work (p.10). While subjects can be seen as actively engaged in doing gender, they always do so from within existing discourses.

For my study, incorporating the concept of performance is interesting in relation to analyzing vlogs. The women vloggers not only explicitly perform in front of a camera with the intention of uploading the vlog to YouTube for others to watch, they also position themselves as if they are the authors of all the vlog content. However, what is communicated in vlogs goes beyond the spoken words, so that appearance, movements, actions and so on form part of what the women are doing as much as what they are saying. The vloggers can be seen to be simultaneously reiterating gendered norms and actively performing gender through speech, appearance and actions.

Bearing in mind the distinctive ways of displaying emphasized or non-emphasized femininity through markers (discussed above), and how appearance may be oriented to in talk, analyzing appearance as simultaneously performative re-iterations of femininity as well as situated and occasioned performances, opens up interesting possibilities for analyzing appearance and performance in vlogs. In my research, appearance, movements and speech are all analysed as 'doing' gender.

This becomes useful, first, when actions and words may appear contradictory, and when vloggers may be seen to be doing several potentially contradictory aspects of femininity



simultaneously. As an example, one vlogger may be seen to display ‘emphasized femininity’ by wearing make-up that conforms to conventional beauty standards, while simultaneously sucking a sausage in an imitation of fellatio. In this vlog, both appearance and performance may be seen as iterating known versions of youthful femininity. One is an iteration of norms of what pretty young women look like and the other is a challenge to those norms through a performance of what McRobbie (2009) refers to as ‘phallic girl’ (p.7). It therefore becomes important for the analysis to consider both aspects and what they do in relation to each other.

Second, it is also possible to distinguish between vlogs not orienting to appearance, giving the impression of being ‘just there’ and not a performance, and vlogs that present performances that are closer to theatrical performance, as in the example with the fellatio imitation. Vlogs can be seen as places where vloggers switch back and forth between performing ‘authenticity’ and performing ‘performance’. Vloggers also frequently occupy a space in between. Keeping the concept of performance in mind therefore aids in analyzing when vloggers may be seen to perform ‘performing’, and what function this may have.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that overt performances are somehow more performative than non-overt performances, but rather that vloggers blend performances of gender, performances of identity and conventions around what performance looks like in ways that can be noted in an analysis. Paying attention to the variable ways of displaying femininity through appearance, appearance as oriented to in talk, and femininity as performance and performativity opens up potential for analyzing what is opened up or closed down by the discursive resources drawn on by the women, where the ‘discursive’ is conceptualized in the more Foucauldian notion as extending beyond talk and text to include appearance, movements and actions.

#### **4.3.2.3 Appearance-Performance analytic foci**

Building on Morison and Macleod's discussion of attending to performativity and performance in data analyses, my analysis adapts Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive approach in order to analyse vlog data.

Taylor and Littleton (2006) outline three premises of their narrative-discursive analysis. The first, following critical discursive psychology (Wetherell 1998), is that talk is situated so that what can be said is shaped by both the immediate context (in their examples, the research interview) and wider meanings and assumptions shaped by the speaker's society. Following this, it is useful to consider vlogs as situated in particular social contexts that shape what can be said and shown. Although vlogging is sometimes hailed as an example of a site where anyone can say anything, there are definite conventions around vlogging. These should not be seen as rules that have to be followed, but conventions that shape what a vlog looks like. For example, most vlogs last between three and ten minutes and feature the vlogger speaking to the camera, usually in their bedroom or living room – that is, a personal space. It can be argued that a vlog needs to follow this format to be recognized as a vlog. Likewise, it is possible to discern similarities in what women vloggers talk about (as already noted, 'the make-up tutorial' is a popular format) as well as conventions around what is shown, how much editing is done, and what the vloggers wear (for example, vlogging while wearing clothes usually associated with being 'dressed up' would need explaining and be the topic of the vlog). The format of 'the vlog' thus shapes what is said and done in a vlog.

Taylor and Littleton's second premise is that talk is social. They argue that "speakers necessarily use a common language which includes accrued ideas and associations" (p.26). In relation to talk, this involves drawing on common discursive resources to tell stories and present identities. In relation to vlogs, and appearance more broadly, it is possible to consider established elements of appearance (such as those that

produce ‘emphasized femininity’) as common discursive resources. Clothes, make-up, hair style etc. can be viewed as known visual and material markers of femininity, and may be used in construing identities as female (vloggers).

As there are many ways of doing femininity, it is also useful to think of the elements making up the categories discussed above, of emphasized and non-emphasized femininity, as visual discursive resources commonly understood to signify styles of femininities. Thinking of material and visual elements in this way provides a useful way of analyzing appearances, as it also leaves room for attending to potentially conflicting markers (e.g. a vlogger wearing a frilly dress, pink lipstick and army boots). Analyzing markers as discursive resources is thus subtler than trying to fit all vloggers into neat categories of ‘emphasized’ or ‘non-emphasized femininity’, while also taking into account that appearance is not passive.

Taylor and Littleton’s third premise is ‘consistency’. They point out that there is an onus on people to be consistent with previous identity work, as well as with expected associations and connections. This is exceedingly useful when analyzing material that includes appearance, speech and actions, as there is arguably a similar onus on vloggers to match spoken words and images, as well as to be consistent with who and what they have previously presented themselves to be. Focusing on consistency or the lack of it, provides a way of analyzing what work is being done. This might involve matching words and appearance, or considering what is being done when words and images do not apparently match. In ‘real life’ conversational interactions, such mismatches could be expected to require repair or explaining. In carefully planned and edited vlogs, it is possible that such apparent mismatches are not trouble that requires repair but are doing something else.

For example, as I discussed in Chapter 3, there appear to be societal expectations around young women’s appearance, such as slim, pretty or ‘hot’, while there simultaneously

appears to be an onus on young women to be seen and heard to reject social pressures. One vlog, that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 6, presents the vlogger talking about body image and the negative effects of expectations on young women. She talks about insecurities she has experienced around her own body, while accompanying the talk with close up shots of parts of her body that visually conform to contemporary beauty standards (e.g. slim hips). Although the spoken words may be heard as rejecting social pressures (e.g. to lose weight), the visual side may be seen as a response to the same pressures, so the vlog can be seen as allowing the vlogger to perform several potentially contradictory identities at once. Thus, drawing on such variable discursive resources as speech and a range of visual markers, may become a way of navigating several potentially contradictory societal demands on young women.

Furthermore, careful analysis of what is communicated and what is oriented to, and what is not oriented to but left as unremarkable, may also be very informative of how femininity and identity more broadly can be done when both words and images are on display. Here Morison and Macleod's attention to performance becomes useful. When several performances can be seen to be going on simultaneously, considering what these performances are doing, and doing *together*, is a fruitful way of analyzing material that is as rich as vlogs. The combination of spoken word, appearance, actions, and the effects which are the outcome of the vlogger being able to edit before uploading, allows for complex combined identity work. Analyzing vlogs discursively while attending to what is being done that reiterates known gender norms, and what potentially bends or troubles such norms, provides a way of accessing what young women vloggers do with the discursive resources that are available to them. It also provides a way of viewing the identity work and femininity that is accomplished by drawing on resources other than speech.

## **4.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have outlined the discursive approach to subjectivity adopted in this study. This approach involves paying attention to how people take up subject positions and also how they are positioned by others. This approach considers identity work, the potential for trouble and the work people may do to avoid troubled positions.

The later part of this chapter discussed ways of working with vlogs as data. I suggested a way of adapting Morison and Macleod's (2013) extension of Taylor and Littleton's (2006) analytic framework in order to enable analysis of data that include audio and visual elements. Part of the analysis of vlog material is concerned with how to describe vlogs, and this will be discussed in Chapter 5, where I outline the method used in this study.

## **Chapter 5 Method**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter explains what kind of data I collected, who the participants are, and what I did with the material collected. As methodology was discussed in Chapter 4, this chapter is a description of what I did, and why. I will describe the two data sources used in this project, interviews and vlogs, and outline the rationale for choosing them. I start with the interviews in section 2, outlining the rationale for using interviews, who the interview participants were, how they were recruited and the contents of the interviews. Section 3 moves on to the vlogs. I first outline the rationale for using them, before explaining my selection criteria. Section 4 deals with the data analysis. I explain how I transcribed the interviews, and then discuss how I approached the analysis of this material. I then discuss how I approached description of the vlogs, as description itself involves analysis. I include a brief reminder of how I decided to approach analysis of vlog material (see Chapter 4). The last section addresses analysing the performance of gender in vlogs.

### **5.2 The interviews**

#### **5.2.1 The rationale for using interviews**

Interviews have long been used in social research. It has been argued that interview data are not appropriate for discursive research as they are not naturally occurring data (Schegloff, 1997; Potter and Hepburn, 2005). The critique is that interviews produce talk that would not otherwise have occurred. Against this, other researchers have argued that interviews are now widespread and recognised in Western culture (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997; Taylor, 2005; Taylor and Littleton, 2006) so they can be considered a

‘natural’ form of data in themselves. Furthermore, Taylor (2001) and Taylor and Littleton (2006) argue that interviews make certain topics salient and participants may volunteer to be interviewed for interview-based research as they have an interest in the topic. In a study like mine, where the researcher is particularly interested in identity work and how participants construct themselves and others, it is desirable for the researcher to invite people to talk about themselves in relation to particular issues. Furthermore, the research interview can be seen as conversation, that is, a normal kind of interaction (Taylor and Littleton (2006). In discursive traditions (other than conversation analysis), where the interest is in the wider discourses drawn upon by participants and the discursive resources available, interviews are useful formats for producing such talk.

### **5.2.2 The participants**

The participants in this research project were young women within the first five years of leaving compulsory schooling, i.e. 18-23 years old. I recruited them because I was particularly interested in the discursive resources available to young women at a time of transition, that is, after childhood and compulsory schooling, before a time of adulthood when they might have decided upon location, careers and children.

The interview participants were recruited from two universities, one a Russell group university in a large town in the West Midlands, the other a newer university from a less affluent part of the West Midlands. I had not originally intended that all participants should be students but had difficulty contacting prospective participants in other locations (such as gyms and Connexions centres for unemployed young people). I therefore decided to recruit participants through universities although I did not confine

the interviews to their experiences as students. The participants studied a variety of courses and represented a variety of class backgrounds and ethnicities.

I conducted 13 interviews in total with 8 participants. The first was a walking interview around the university campus. I conducted a second interview with 3 participants, on Skype. The only participant who was interviewed three times did not want to use Skype and chose a café away from university for the second and third interviews. When I use extracts from the participants in the analysis chapters, I include information about which round of interviews the extract comes from and what the location was (i.e. Campus, Skype or café).

I have labelled interview participants as ‘Participant 1’, ‘participant 2’ and so on, rather than using pseudonyms, as names often convey various meanings to various people in terms of class, ethnicity and so on (see Billig 1999, Taylor 2012) . I find it problematic to either ignore this and somehow attempt to pick ‘neutral’ names, arguably a category that does not exist, or to attempt to match pseudonyms to class and ethnicity as claimed by participants where they oriented directly to this, or attempt to match them myself when they did not.

The vloggers are labelled by their own YouTube usernames, partly because these are not people’s real names as it is, but most importantly because the vlogs are the Vloggers’ publicly available property which should be cited and referenced appropriately.



### **5.2.3 Recruitment and consent**

After getting approval from the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) I started placing recruitment posters in universities (see Appendix A). These posters were put up in various places at several universities. The participants who came forward were from one Russell group university in the West Midlands and one newer university in a smaller urban location of the West Midlands. I placed posters on notice boards in communal areas of most departments within the universities and in the women's toilets of departments and student union areas of both universities.

These posters provided the first information about my project (see Appendix A). The posters explained who I am, the subject I am researching, who I was recruiting and that I was recruiting for 1-3 interviews face-to-face or online. It further gave my e-mail, telephone and Facebook contact details for anyone interested in participating or wanting further information. The posters made clear that I was hoping to recruit women of all classes, shapes, sexual orientations and ethnicities.

The participants contacted me via email or text, after which we arranged a time and place for the first interview, also via email or text messaging. As participants contacted me, I e-mailed them an information sheet (see Appendix C) with a longer description of the study, details of what each interview would involve, and inviting them to ask if they had any questions. We then arranged a mutually convenient time for the first interview, usually about a week later.

At the interview, before starting recording, we had a brief conversation introducing ourselves, and I would ask if they had any further questions. I then asked them to read and sign a consent form (see Appendix D). There were two separate consent forms for the face-to-face and Skype Interviews, as the skype interviews included me looking at their Facebook pages. Those participants who agreed to do the skype interviews, had been reminded at the end of the first interview what the Skype interview would involve.

The consent form for these would be emailed to participants and subsequently mailed back to me. After the interviews, participants were given a sheet thanking them for taking part and repeating my contact information.

### **5.2.3 Conducting the interviews**

The two rounds of interviews were intended to cover different topics. The first invited talk about issues that were specifically relevant to the campus setting. The second round invited talk about uses of online spaces as well as appearance online, and imagined and desired futures.

The first interview took place in the location which formed the basis for the participant's recruitment, i.e. the university the student attended. It involved a walking interview, where I asked the participant to show me around the campus and select the parts of campus they used or liked the most. This setting formed the background for talking about life on campus. The interviews were semi-structured as I had a list of questions to address in this first interview (See Appendix B). However, the participants could also shape these interviews by talking about aspects of their lives at university as they were showing me around.

I asked them about whether they thought appearance mattered in that place, and whether they felt this was an issue mostly for themselves or for other people. This was followed with questions about whether they thought class was an issue, and whether they thought students from all class backgrounds attended there. This included asking them whether they thought of themselves as being a particular class. I further asked whether they thought women behaved differently there to how men behaved, and lastly, I asked about whether their friends and families attended, or had attended, university and what friends and family thought of the participants doing it. During some interviews these subjects were expanded upon as participants took those questions in other directions, and in

some interviews some questions were replaced with others. As some participants had said that they were happy to do 2-3 interviews and others had stated that they would only do the one, those who would be interviewed only once were also asked about hopes and plans for the future.

The second round of interviews focussed on pictures the women had posted to Facebook (or similar social networking sites). These interviews took place over Skype to match the media context with the focus of the interviews (although one participant preferred to meet face-to-face for subsequent interviews and was interviewed in a café away from university).

I started the skype interviews by inviting participants to tell me about people, places and events in pictures they had posted to Facebook, initially using the photographs as prompts for eliciting participants' narratives. Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, and Phoenix (2008) have argued in favour of photo-elicitation methods over word-only interviews, suggesting that "such methods elicit more concrete information, act as a trigger to memory and are likely to evoke a more emotional many-layered response in participants" (p.346). I hoped that narratives based on photographs would access aspects of young women's engagements with constructions of femininity that might not emerge in the other interviews. After asking the participants to talk about the pictures more generally, I invited them to discuss the appearance of themselves and others in pictures they or others posted to Facebook, and to talk about why they chose to share those particular pictures, and whether they had any comments on them.

In these interviews, I had also planned to ask participants to talk about items from their wardrobes. However, it turned out that the participants in these interviews spoke extensively about using social media, how people appeared in pictures posted there, and talked more specifically about occasions from their own lives when they had dressed in particular ways, so these interviews became more specifically about these subjects

addressed by the participants, than the questions I had prepared in advance. These interviews furthermore included talking about what the participants considered to be the biggest issues in their lives at that moment and about their hopes and plans for the future (see Appendix B).

I had planned to conduct a third round of interviews with some of the participants, with follow up questions based on preliminary analysis of the first two interviews. In practice, only one participant volunteered for a third interview, and this was guided extensively by follow up questions and partly by focusing on plans and expectations for the immediate and more distant future.

## **5.3 The vlogs**

### **5.3.1. The rationale for using vlogs**

During my recruitment of interview participants, I was advised by younger women that the best way to access young people as participants would be Social Media Networks, ideally Tumblr linked to via Twitter. One woman told me about a group called TYFA (Twitter Youth Feminist Army ( @\_TYFA )), a group of young women tweeting about young women. Their tweets, associated blogs, and Facebook group posts encompass a wide array of issues with a common thread of ‘issues relevant to young women’.

During the time I was looking into social media use, this group’s tweets mostly involved links to Tumblr posts and YouTube vlogs as well as conversations with other women. As I discovered that most young Twitter users include links to their Tumblr on their twitter, I was able to follow those women to Tumblr, and from there discovered links to YouTube vlogs, either their own or other people’s vlogs. I concluded that as I invariably ended up on YouTube, watching young people’s vlogs, such vlogs constitute a significant site in young women’s lives, as both women are both producers and

consumers of such material. I therefore decided to collect vlog material as a second dataset for the research.

Discussing the ethics around internet research, Young and Burrows (2013) conclude, in relations to their research involving analysis of vlogs, that given that such videos are uploaded to YouTube for anyone to watch and that the researchers are therefore not putting the women at any more risk than they had originally put themselves to, consent did not need to be obtained (p. 503). This can, however, be seen as a grey area that is changing as ethics around new technologies are reviewed, and may be an issue to reconsider in the future.

### **5.3.2 The selection of vlogs**

As described above, in making the decision to analyse YouTube vlogs, I had been tracking TYFA from Tumblr and Twitter onto YouTube. Those young women who vlogged about a conference they wanted to organise in turn linked to other young female YouTubers, and YouTube itself suggested other channels to watch based on the clips watched. I was able to gather a long list of young female YouTubers following these recommendations. Shortly afterwards the Observer ran an article listing some of the most popular vloggers on YouTube, which gave me a further selection of female vloggers to analyse (Lewis, Fox and Michael, 2013). (I had initially tried using YouTube's search function to find young female vloggers, but any search using terms such as 'female', 'girl' or 'woman' resulted in videos with more or less sexual representations of young women, not usually uploaded by women. This unsurprising result was interesting in and of itself, but not helpful to me.)

From my longer list, I then filtered out those who were not UK-based (about half were in the US), and those who fell outside the age range 18-23, which gave me a list of 11

vloggers who matched my criteria of target age range 18-23 years and were based in the UK and identified as female.

I then started by downloading vlogs from the 11 different women, initially collecting a very large sample of every video uploaded by everyone within the previous year. Given that some vloggers were more active than others, I had to consider how much material to include from each. I decided to use material from vloggers over the period corresponding to the time I interviewed the interview participants, i.e. the year from October 2013 to October 2014, and then limited the amount of material to 1 hour's most recent material from each vlogger.

Selecting the most recent vlogs meant that for some vloggers the period covered was the whole year, while for others it was closer to covering the most recent two months to October 2014. (As vlogs are different to interviews in that it is more 'concentrated' talk time compared with conversational interviews, aiming to include up to three hours from each to match the interviews would generate far too much material, as would including all vlogs covering a full year from all vloggers). Thus, I had roughly 10 hours vlogging material, made up of about 130 vlogs from 11 different women, spanning up to one calendar year.

Although it was very tempting to select particular vlogs that specifically addressed particular issues interesting to my research focus, selecting vlogs based on chronology rather than vlogs addressing particular issues allowed themes to emerge from the vlogs rather than being pre-selected by me. Furthermore, using vlogs from the same individuals over time enabled an analysis of the vloggers' talk about changes and transitions in their lives

## **5.4 The data analysis**

I started the analysis by first analysing the interview material. I then started analysing the vlogs separately, before combining the analyses of the two kinds of material. In practice, analysis of all the material was an iterative process, whereby emerging themes from both interviews and vlogs informed my further interpretation of both kinds of material.

In the following sections I first outline how I approached each data set, starting with the interview material, followed by sections discussing how I approached the description and analysis of the vlogs. Lastly, I discuss issues raised by the vlogs in comparison with the interviews regarding performance.

### **5.4.1 Transcribing the interviews**

As I had a substantial amount of interview data, I used a commercial transcription service to transcribe first drafts which I annotated and enriched prior to analysis. The transcripts provided by the transcription service had used conventional notation, such as full stops and exclamation marks. I therefore made quite a few changes to the transcripts while listening to the audio-recordings to make them more suitable. The transcription process was here part of the analytic process, as emphases, intonation and so on were recorded, but it is also worth noting that transcriptions should not be considered a neutral element. As my transcription reflects my interpretation of what was said, it inevitably also represents my focus on what was important to note, and what was not. All the interviews were transcribed in full.

For transcription, I used a simplified version of a reduced Jeffersonian system. I only indicated those details that I considered relevant, rather than signaling every interactional detail. I have included indication of pauses thus (.) where the number of

full stops indicates the duration of the pause, and emphasis is indicated by underlining. Descriptions are included occasionally in the interviews and very often in transcription of the vlogs, indicated by square brackets e.g. [close-up, wriggles bum]. Where speech is omitted this is indicated with square brackets thus [...].

#### **5.4.2 Analysing the interviews**

Following Wetherell (1998) and Taylor and Littleton (2006), I focused both on the detail of an interaction and the broader focus of discourses being drawn upon. Going through the transcripts and vlogs repeatedly as well as familiarising myself with the audio-recordings of the interviews, I annotated the transcripts which led to a collection of preliminary concepts. I then created files for each concept with extracts from both vlogs and interviews (some material featured in more than one file, as several concepts featured in it). These concepts were sometimes recognizable existing categories such as ‘confidence’, and sometimes something more specific to these data and my focus that was recurring across the data, such as ‘doing our generation’. This initial labelling involved both attention to what participants were clearly talking about (such as talking about their desire to be thin) and attention to what was being done in the talk.

This list was initially a collection of those concepts that stood out as clearly present in many interviews and vlogs, and having once identified these I returned to the recordings, transcripts and vlogs to consider whether there were other instances where the concept was present that I had initially missed. This was a complex process of reconsidering some parts of the data to consider whether they followed an emerging pattern, but also considering why I had not initially labelled them with a given concept. In some instances, a pattern was slowly emerging, meaning that I had not been considering it during previous readings and annotations of transcripts, although it seemed obvious on subsequent readings, with a new concept in mind, that an extract was orienting to this as well. However, as new concepts emerged, I frequently had to



consider whether it was possible to interpret extracts differently to how I had initially labelled them.

Furthermore, during this process some wider concepts or patterns were subdivided into other concepts as closer analyses suggested subtleties and differences. For example, I ended up with separate concepts labelled ‘self-improvement’ and ‘confidence’ which I had previously categorised together, but on closer analyses decided were drawing on sufficiently different discursive resources to constitute separate concepts. As the extracts grouped together under a given concepts often represented variability in the ways discourses were used or the work they were doing, this variability itself sometimes hinted at different patterns, suggesting new concepts.

This process of labelling and relabelling was by necessity iterative, as every time a new way of considering extracts emerged, I returned to reconsider other parts of the data set in light of this. Sometimes new extracts would be added to a data file and sometimes extracts would be moved, as they no longer belonged with the shared concept.

The benefits of such a lengthy iterative process were that the data had to be considered from new angles many times, and sometimes new concepts would emerge that I had not expected. I also discussed some emerging concepts and their associated data with my supervisors, and presented initial ideas to a discourse discussion group, which provided useful feedback on whether my initial interpretations were convincing to others.

### **5.4.3 Describing the vlogs**

As discussed in section 5.4.1, the interviews were transcribed by a transcription service. I also had some vlogs transcribed by this service, but as I found the transcription of the

spoken words only to be of very little use, I decided to transcribe the vlogs myself, so that I could then describe the visual aspects alongside the spoken words. As I had far more vlog material than I could possibly use, I took extensive notes while watching each vlog, and returned to watching the vlogs repeatedly when considering concepts and patterns, rather than transcribing all the vlogs in full. Those vlogs that I ended up using were then transcribed in full.

By acknowledging that there cannot be said to be a ‘reality’ of appearance behind what the appearance does when drawing on cultural markers, I simultaneously simplified and complicated the question of how to describe vloggers. Without an idea of a neutral reality, any concern I had with trying to find ‘the truest’ description disappeared. However, by viewing appearance as performance, that is, as doing femininity, I had to rephrase the question into ‘What is the appearance doing?’ and attend to this as part of the analysis. This was different to ‘description’. The more appropriate question to address was now ‘Which shared cultural markers are being used?’

This will obviously never be a ‘neutral’ or ‘true’ interpretation, but will reflect what I – as both an analyst and a situated social actor -believe those aspects of appearance show. Given that I would be relying on what I take to be shared cultural meanings, I had to consider whether my description claims about appearance might cause other people to comment or object. For example, when describing size, I had to carefully consider whether my description of someone as slim might be challenged. The description should not be taken as a truth of what that person actually looks like, but as a way someone could plausibly be described without challenge. I also reflected on possible bias and conflicts which might influence my interpretations.

Furthermore, inevitably I would not be describing everything, but focusing on those parts of appearance that stood out to me. This means that there will always be the

possibility that others might see something different. Others might notice aspects of appearance that I did not notice, and it will be possible that others may interpret the aspects I did notice differently. In places, it may be relevant that I am considerably older than both the vloggers and their presumed audience, and, for example, styles of make-up may carry meanings for younger people that I do not share.

However, as the aspects I do mention and describe will be those that I deem relevant for the analysis, I will explain why these features are described and their relevance. This applies to both the appearance of vlogger in terms of size, make-up, and clothes, where relevant, and to the actions performed, and to editing such as close-ups. Because description of appearance and performance forms part of the analysis, it is important that my decisions for the selection of what is described are mentioned, rather than presented as if they were neutral givens.

#### **5.4.4 Analysing the vlogs**

Vlog analysis was discussed at length in Chapter 4, section 4.3.2.3. There I outlined an adaptation of Morison and Macleod's extensions of Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive analytic framework. This adapts their attention to performativity and performance in narrative-discursive analysis to suit analysis of audio-visual material.

#### **5.4.5 Vlogs as data**

Discussing the potential of online data for social science researchers, Morison et al. (2015), point to macro-political restrictions on who has access to content on the internet, and the micro-politics of online spaces in terms of who may speak and who is silenced in these spaces. Adam Jowett (2015), for example, highlights how 'flaming and trolling' online silences certain voices and topics in online discussion forums.

When analysing vlogs by young women it is thus necessary to look at which topics are vlogged about as well as who vlogs. This includes considering what is not spoken about and who is not vlogging. I cannot make any certain claims about exclusions and why some topics do not come up. However, I can discuss the way many vlogs are tagged by other vloggers, and the way vloggers sometimes speak to, or about, subjects brought up in other vlogs. There does seem to be a community of vloggers, albeit loose, where it is possible that success as a vlogger (in terms of views and subscribers) is more easily achieved if one can access this community and be mentioned by other vloggers.

Likewise, vloggers usually present their vlogs as videos made about a given topic because this particular topic seemed important to them at that time. However, there are patterns in the types of things that are vlogged about, and ways of presenting oneself in the vlogs. Vlogging conventions can be seen to encourage certain styles of vlogging (e.g. 'entertainment', make-up tutorials), and diary-style reflections on particular issues (such as body image and confidence), are recognisable categories. Furthermore, the personal appearances of vloggers may also be interpreted as similar (i.e. the young women vloggers are most often well-groomed, they wear make-up, and they are slim).

Online data have sometimes been used to research otherwise hard-to-reach groups. For example, a study by Ferndale, Watson and Munro, and another by Horrell, Stephens and Breheny (both cited in Gibson, 2015) wanted to reach for research participants who may experience social exclusion or isolation: people living with deafness and informal caregivers, respectively. These researchers created on-line forums in order for these otherwise marginalised voices to be heard. Although the vlogs I am analysing do not represent marginalised groups, it is interesting to reflect on the popularity of vlogging among young women, both as producers and viewers. It is possible to argue that the alleged democratising potential of the internet is discernible here, and specifically that

those young women who vlog are using the internet/vlogging as a means of being seen and heard in ways which might not be as easy offline.

Furthermore, most of these vloggers speak as if they are assuming that their audiences consist of other young women and girls, and as if they are assuming their audience is 'amicable'; for example, many take up an authoritative, wise-woman position that it might be more complicated and harder (and not 'allowed') for them to occupy in off-line interactions where such positioning might more easily be challenged by interlocutors. This is not to say that all women vloggers can take up this position in a straightforward, unchallenged way, or that any of them do it without providing 'evidence' to back up their claim to such a position, but rather that the imagined challenges to such a positioning that need defending against are more under the vloggers' control in vlogs (which may be edited, improved and so on before being uploaded) than may be the case in offline interactions. There is thus an element of vlogger control over which potential challenges they defend against, and to what extent they make any imagined challenges explicit, and how they position themselves in relation to any actual and imagined challenges. For instance, some vloggers take an almost scornful approach to voiced and unvoiced critiques that they may not have a 'right' to position themselves as authoritatively as they do. Potentially, then, vlogging can give some 'democratising' control over how a young woman is positioned and positions herself, and thus provides a platform for speaking that for some young women is not found as easily offline.

It is also interesting to reflect on who decides which groups' voices are marginalised. The examples of hard-of hearing people and informal caregivers mentioned above seem fairly uncontentious, but it could seem far-fetched to claim that able-bodied young women are struggling to have their voices heard. However, we may also consider what

we mean by ‘voices being heard’. Vlogs produced by young women may offer different aspects of ‘young women’s voices’ and may show young women speaking from different positions than they would take up in other settings.

For example, topics such as the application of make-up can be belittled and even ridiculed as ‘girly’, trivial and unimportant elsewhere, so vlogs on this topic may be similar in some senses to offline ‘women only’ spaces where women and girls will not be ridiculed or silenced for discussing ‘girly’ subjects. Vlogs are of course not actually women’s spaces but open to scrutiny by others who may not consider themselves the target audience, or indeed have been addressed as the audience. The make-up vlogger Zoella, who currently has more than 8 million subscribers and recently published a book, is an example of a vlogger who has both been hugely successful and heavily criticised offline for being ‘vacuous’ (Grove, 2014). Regardless of one’s view of whether make-up is an appropriate or worthwhile topic for vlogging and ‘deserving’ of success, or whether one would have preferred Zoella to vlog about issues that seem more important or worthy, it is notable that YouTube has provided the possibility for this space that is mostly used by young women and girls to emerge. It is, moreover, equally interesting that the most successful female vloggers (in terms of numbers of viewers, offline spin-offs and financial income) are those who vlog about make-up. This also highlights how online-worlds and vlogging are not separate from offline society. Vlogging about subjects perceived as ‘vacuous’ and inherently female attracts criticism, but it evidently also attracts huge amounts of subscribers, and may become both a career and source of sometimes substantial income. It therefore seems relevant to consider whether YouTube currently offers space for young women to be seen and heard, while also asking whether those who will be seen and heard the most are the ones who perform recognisable ‘emphasized femininity’.

Some women vlog more than others (in terms of appearance, socio-economic status and so on), and there seem to be unwritten rules surrounding vlogging. However, we can also see the internet as a space where young women may speak differently, position themselves differently, and be positioned differently, than they would offline. There are similarities here to Raun's (2014) finding that YouTube provided a space for trans people to be seen and heard, while simultaneously entrenching a fairly narrow narrative of transitioning which it could be difficult to deviate from. YouTube might similarly be seen as simultaneously opening up and closing down possibilities for what can be talked about, and ways of performing, 'young woman'.

I have noted that some literature talks about the democratizing potential of YouTube for less visible groups of people (Youngs, 1999; Anarbaeva, 2011). Of course, it could be argued that the many vloggers who are young, conventionally 'pretty', and often white, young women are already visible. However, such young women can be simultaneously marginalised in terms of being heard and visible, because they are seen and hailed as visible in a certain way. For example, McRobbie (2009) argues that young women are hailed as women of capacity and increasingly visible. Yet this visibility is narrowly defined if it is limited to the young women who can be seen as sexy and sexually empowered, successful, and ideal neoliberal consumers. It is possible that young women who do not fit that version of young womanhood are marginalised, as are women who challenge such depictions. Following from this, online spaces might be expected, via their democratising potential, to offer opportunities for young women to present themselves differently and have conversations that fall outside the dominant conceptualisation of what it means to be a young woman today. This raises an interesting question about the extent to which young women do this, and the extent to which they reproduce existing ideas and ideals about what young women are and should be. Considering that the internet and online spaces are not separate from the rest of the

world, it is pertinent to ask what young women do in these contexts that theoretically allow them more control over what they can say and how they can say it.

#### **5.4.6 Analysing the performance of gender**

Tonks et al (2015) analysed pictures posted by young people to Facebook in their research on young people's drinking practices. They suggest that online digital photos can be used to answer questions relating to multiple concerns, including gender displays. Similarly, it seems clear that gender displays are an aspect of vlogs that are as interesting to analyse as the spoken language in the vlogs. Obviously, this means that the analysis of vlogs will be in many ways different to the analysis of the more conventional interview data, because physical appearance (looks, make-up), use of body, movement, close-ups of body parts, visibility of body parts, camera angles etc. all form part of the vlog data.

Another tricky difference between vlogs and interviews is the self-aware performance element that is especially prominent in some vlogs. For example, one vlogger describes the channel of hers that I discuss here (she has others) as 'the funny channel'. All vlogs, and for that matter interviews, may be seen as performance, but there are differences in the overtness and knowingness involved. In the case of performance done with a purpose of entertaining and being funny, this raises some interesting reflections on the status of the spoken language. Some vloggers at times overtly claim likes and dislikes and present self-descriptions that appear to be stated with the purpose of being funny. Although a discursive analysis avoids speculating about the intentions behind the words, it appears that the viewer is not expected to take the words spoken as a true descriptions of the way things are. It is therefore necessary to analyse carefully what such statements do, and what the jocular framing does.



One further complication with vlogs as data is the way that the vlogs are far less 'bounded' or 'contained' than interview data. They frequently refer to other vlogs or channels, speak to comments left on previous vlogs and invite new comments. Furthermore, vlogs, in comparison with interviews, often speak to current topics or issues on YouTube and can thus be seen as more overtly interactive and situated within ongoing conversations and events. This is on the one hand a very exciting feature of vlogs as data; they are in one sense more 'living' and 'transient' than interview data. However, it also meant that I had to make decisions about where to stop, for example, to not include comments or follow referrals to other channels in my selection. As vlogs could easily be seen as part of a never-ending thread, I had to make some arbitrary selection criteria decisions.

Of course YouTube data cannot be taken as a straightforward representation of what concerns young women generally at this moment. I analyse which themes come up and how these young women talk about them in the vlogs they have chosen to upload on the internet. At the time of my selection, I noticed four main 'loose' categories: make-up tutorials, book/film/TV reviews, a broader theme of 'diary-style' musings on events and changes in the vlogger's life, and vlogs more directly commenting on 'gender-issues', with some overlap between them within individual vlogs.

Gibson et al. (2015) argue, in relation to their research on online discussion forums for women living with breast cancer, that online spaces have been presented as positive, empowering spaces for people who traditionally have had limited control over their bodies, including women, but that these forums also reproduce existing gender norms and heterosexism. Other online spaces, such as the vlogs produced by and presumably aimed at young women, can likewise simultaneously be seen as sites that, theoretically at least, allow women control over discourses around young women, their bodies, their

primary concerns, values, opinions, what they 'should' do and want etc., and sites that reproduce norms existing in their discursive contexts off and on-line.

As vlogs are to some extent interactive, in that others can talk back in the comments, (imagined audiences and their responses appear to always be considered), vloggers can clearly not be considered to be outside social contexts or to have complete control of the form and content of their vlogs. They are also, obviously, working with the discursive resources available to them. As Gleeson, (2011) quoted in Gibson et al (2015) argues “Visual images, like language, are not simply reflections of reality, but reproduce power relations”, and vlogs can be seen as reproducing some complex power relations.

Morison (2015), cites Markham’s (2004) argument that

“the Internet potentially provides critically oriented qualitative researchers with new tools for conducting research, new venues for social research, and new means for understanding the way social realities get constructed and reproduced through discursive behaviours”.

It is pertinent now to consider the internet in general, and YouTube specifically, as an integral part of young people’s social realities, and thus it is pertinent to consider how YouTube vlogs produced by and specifically for young women construct, challenge and reproduce possibilities for ways of being ‘a young woman’.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described the data I collected in interviews and vlogs. In the next three chapters, Chapters 6, 7 and 8, I analyse the participants’ talk. This includes analysing what the interview and vlog material shows about how young women orient to their bodies, and what kinds of people they construct themselves as being. As expected, there were inconsistencies and considerable ambiguity in how the women talked about their bodies. I also analyse what kind of characteristics emerge from their

talk regarding the ideal young woman today. In the final analysis chapter, I analyse how women construct themselves as particular kinds of responsible people, through the way they position themselves in their talk.

## Chapter 6 Ambiguities in talk about the body

A lot of research on young women is concerned with sexualisation and what young women do with their bodies. As discussed in Chapter 3, both Evans et al (2010) and Gill (2011) have attended to women's own engagement with their own sexualisation, which often involves women choosing to sexually objectify themselves, or in Gill's terms, sexual subjectification (Gill, 2011, p.65). They discuss how women often frame engagement with practices that could be viewed as objectifying in terms of their own pleasure. Evans et al. write critically about any simplistic attempts to discuss such practices in terms of the presence or absence of agency, while Gill calls for a more sophisticated analysis of the relationship between culture and subjectivity. The present research is not explicitly concerned with the analysis of sexualisation or objectifying practices per se; however the young women interviewed as well as female vloggers do orient to women's relationships with their bodies. Rather than focus narrowly on 'objectification' or 'sexualisation', I am following Dilley et al's (2014) example of using Connell's term 'emphasized femininity' as discussed in Chapter 3. In this research, I use it in the sense of 'culturally sanctioned and understood desirable femininity'.

As discussed in Chapter 4, this research adopts a narrative-discursive approach (Taylor and Littleton 2006, Taylor 2005). Narrative approached from a discursive perspective has two main aspects (Reynolds et al, 2007). One aspect considers how speakers use well-known, or canonical, narratives as a resource in their talk. The other involves investigation of patterns of sequence and consequence in speakers' talk. Reynolds et al argue that such patterns indicate the narrative resources through which speakers construct their identities (Reynolds et al, 2007). Citing Abell et al. (2000), they argue that narratives are organized by how people constitute themselves in the given

interaction. The identity work being done in any given situation is thus best seen as a co-constructed and shaped by the social context.

In the first part of this chapter, I look at how my participants drew on narratives of progress as a resource. The idea of people progressing and developing over the life-course arguably constitutes an established narrative available to speakers. In Section 1 of this chapter I consider what work was done by the women by drawing on this narrative and some of the issues this creates.

In the second part of the chapter, I focus on how the women's talk constructed 'trouble' in performances of femininity. Taylor (2007) describes a troubled identity as one that may be 'hearable' by others as implausible or inconsistent with other claimed identities. In Section 2, I investigate what some of the women constructed as troubled positions in relation to appearance and some performances of femininities, as well as ways they negotiated such positions and sometimes avoided trouble.

## **6.1 Progress narratives**

A narrative-discursive approach looks at situated narratives, or tellings of a life-story, as doing identity work. When a person talks about themselves in the past, they are engaged in constructing themselves as a particular kind of person in the present. In the interviews and vlogs I analyse, when the speakers talked about themselves in the past as well as in the present, they constructed themselves as certain kinds of people in relation to a construction of women more widely.

Between them, the participants built a picture of the world and people in it, as one where women have had problems with their bodies or body-image, usually in the way of having wanted to be slimmer, when they were younger. Simultaneously, the participants present a picture of themselves as no longer having this problem (while other women

might). This presents a picture of women as people who have a shared history of unhappiness with their own body, while each individual participant had successfully overcome this. Thus, while other women may still have such issues, the participants' talk constructs body-issues as an adolescent or younger pathological stage which they have moved out of.

Unhappiness with one's own body was described by nearly all participants as going hand-in-hand with being a younger girl, and invariably external influences were cited as causing this unhappiness. In Extract 1 the participant is talking about how she would like the world to be different if she had a daughter one day:

### **Extract 1**

Participant 2, 2. Interview, café:

- 1 Participant 2: I'd always tell her take pride in your appearance (..) in how you look,
- 2 because when I was younger I had massive body issues (.) I don't have any more I've
- 3 overcome them but I think every girl grows up feeling insecure because of how they
- 4 look so (...) I want to shield her from all you know all the crap like (... )
- 5 MP: It's interesting you say that that most girls all girls grow up that way (.) why do
- 6 you think that is (..)
- 7 Participant 2: Erm (...) well I suppose it's like because of like there's like capitalism
- 8 and but I think the beauty industry and the diet industry and that kind of thing (...)
- 9 always try and convince women and girls that there's something wrong with them...

It was common across the dataset to cite external factors as the cause of girls' unhappiness with their own bodies. In lines 7-9 the participant cites 'the beauty industry

and the diet industry' in her explanation for why 'every girl grows up feeling insecure because of how they look' (line 3). Several participants drew on such discourses of the media, such as advertising, as harmful. This arguably reflects feminist and media arguments about the harmful effects of the way women are represented. Critiques of such representations, for example in advertising, have evidently become a resource for women to draw on. The young women in this research could be seen as being very media literate, in the sense that they were very aware of how advertising to women works. However, this literacy or awareness did not mean that the women's engagement with bodies and body-related issues was uncomplicated.

It was very common for these women to explain that they themselves had had issues of unhappiness with their own bodies when they were younger, as this participant does in line 2, and explain that they personally had overcome this, as in line 2 'I don't anymore I've overcome them'. The cause of unhappiness was thus placed with the media or beauty industries, but the overcoming of body-issues was narrated as an individual journey.

In Chapter 3, I discussed a study by Gill et al (2012) that found that the girls the researchers spoke to knew how media manipulations worked, but this knowledge did not make them feel any better or not long to look like media representations of women. In my study, there was a similar strong sense that the women considered advertising and other media industries to create problems for girls and women. However, the women in this study, who were older than the girls studied by Gill et al, positioned themselves as more mature and able to see through media manipulations. This suggests that for these young women inhabiting a subject position of 'too wise to be manipulated by media' was a way of positioning themselves positively as young women who do not fall for such nonsense. Such a positioning allowed them to critique media influences, but only in relation to younger and more vulnerable girls.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Baker (2010) found that the women in her study emphasised volition and agency, while downplaying any impact of difficult circumstances. The findings in the present study, that the women did not talk about media-influences as difficult for themselves anymore, suggest similarities with the way the women in Baker's study talked about their circumstances. When maturity and invulnerability is framed as achieved through a personal journey, such framing makes it difficult to talk about being negatively influenced by beauty-ideals while also positioning oneself as mature.

### **6.1.1 Overcoming Body Issues as Evidence of Maturity**

While this 'overcoming' is presented as part of the speaker's own process of growing up, it is not told as an automatic effect of aging chronologically, but as something that requires effort, as illustrated in this next extract. The participant had been talking about media images of 'sexy' pop-singers and why she found them problematic:

#### **Extract 2**

Interview Participant 9, 1.st interview, on Campus

- 1 Participant 9: Which is what I am saying once that image is in your head everything
- 2 else goes out and all you start doing is mentally comparing and even I did it sometimes
- 3 and I was yeah but my body is not all that and (inaudible 1) but that's taken a lot for me
- 4 to get to that age to get to that place and the reason why I got to that place because I
- 5 learnt I am for me I am (name) I can only be (name) I can't be anybody else I can't be
- 6 this person I can't be that person and you take me as I am or you find the one you are
- 7 looking for
- 8 MP: Is there any part of your body that you would change in any way if you could (..)
- 9 like with say a magic wand or something



10 Participant 9: No because I did that with hard work I didn't like my weight so I lost a  
11 bit

In this extract the participant narrates a story of having thought negatively about her own body (line 2-3 'my body is not all that' and line 9 'I didn't like my weight') but having now progressed to an age and a place where she no longer has such thoughts. When she says 'even I did it sometimes', (line 2) she may be heard as acknowledging, or admitting to having done something, which by this admission-like framing becomes a negative thing to have done. However, by admitting to having done it and including the word 'even' in the sentence, the negative mental comparing she is talking about becomes something we might expect most women to do, in spite of the implied undesirability of doing so. The participant simultaneously positions herself as a strong character, evidenced by her overcoming of this negative comparing, and a person who can authentically speak on this issue as she herself has done this. When the words 'even I' are used this marks the speaker out as special, -as if we might have expected her to be immune.

Using this phrase, her engagement in 'mentally comparing' (line 2) constructs the impetus to engage in mental comparisons as exceptionally strong, as 'even' she was drawn into doing it. This simultaneously has the effect of constructing her as a strong person, since we might reasonably have expected her to not be drawn into this. The identity work being done in the small phrase 'even I' shows one way of navigating a dilemma of how to talk about external pressures in relation to appearance and telling oneself as a strong woman. This dilemma was found across the dataset, as most participants talked about having experienced appearance-related pressures, but framed it as something they no longer did.

This participant's narrative goes on to describe the present as an age and a place which she has 'got to' (lines 3-4). The current, positive, way of thinking is related both to age, which implies greater maturity, and also a place which it has 'taken a lot for me to get to' (line 3). It is thus not merely a matter of growing older in chronological years, but something that has taken a lot of effort and, as she goes on to elaborate, this involved learning. It is striking that although Participant 2 talked about the beauty and diet industries, and Participant 9 talked about images of pop-singers, both narratives indicated that the effects of these external influences were negative, and the negative effect was related to the women's internal mental states (Extract 1, line 3 'feeling insecure' and Extract 2, line 2 'mentally comparing'), and thus located inside individual women's heads, even though the problem was presented as one affecting women in general.

### **6.1.2 Strong v Weak People**

For these speakers, presenting a narrative of body issues as something they individually have successfully progressed beyond, positions other women who may not be able to claim satisfaction with their own bodies as weaker. In the following extract, the speaker comes close to pathologising a woman who is described by her as less than happy with her own body:

#### **Extract 3:**

Interview Participant 4, 1.st Interview, campus.

- 1 Participant 4: And a friend of mine who has like (.) she tragically low self-esteem is
- 2 always putting sort of selfies on Facebook and doing like updating her profile picture
- 3 being like good hair guys and it's because I know her and I know she's not very
- 4 confident (.) and like to do that and for people to like the photo and boys to want to be

5 her friend on Facebook and things like that (.) kind of makes her feel better about  
6 herself and I think if she had like a little bit more confidence in herself she probably  
7 wouldn't do that (..)

In this extract, the speaker positions herself positively in relation to her friend, by speaking of this friend sympathetically as someone who has problems (Line 1 'she has tragically low self-esteem' and line 3 'I know her and I know she's not very confident'). However, in doing so the speaker takes a superior, rather patronizing position in relation to the other woman.

I will be taking a closer look at talk around 'confidence' and its related concept 'self-esteem' in the next chapter, but what is interesting here is the phrasing of self-esteem as 'tragically' low. Low self-esteem is framed in this context as a negative personality trait. In relation to 'the body' and how women present their appearance it is thus framed as desirable to have high self-esteem, and feel good about one's own appearance. The word 'tragically' in this context construes a weak character, someone to be pitied, implying that the opposite, high self-esteem, is a character trait to be admired. Indeed, the participant went on to elaborate on this a few minutes later:

#### **Extract 4:**

Interview Participant 4, 1.st Interview, campus.

1 Participant 4: Maybe (..) I think it (.) I think it just comes down to like self-esteem and  
2 self-confidence more than appearance and self-confidence..

3 MP: mm

4 Participant 4: You know I had a friend who a lot of people have said was particularly  
5 nice looking (.) but she was dead confident and like she would go out to clubs wearing  
6 clothes like these revealing clothes but she was very happy in how she looked and she

- 7 couldn't let anybody else tell her otherwise (.) which I kind of I always thought was  
8 admirable

The participants' telling of themselves as having overcome past body issues, describing of people who seem impervious to the opinions of others as admirable, and the framing of women who are seen as having insecurities with their own bodies as 'tragic', i.e. someone who has problems, not only constructs a story of personal progress, but makes this a story of progress towards being a stronger and more admirable character.

Not feeling good about one's own appearance is constructed as a weakness, and this is something women use in their own identity work to position themselves as strong. This makes it interesting that such strength or weakness is talked about in terms of internal mental states through references to 'self-esteem' and 'self-confidence' (Extract 4, lines 1-2). The patronizing sympathy expressed for the friend with low confidence in Extract 3, not only indicates that it is a flaw to not be happy about how one looks, but also that the way to be happy about your appearance is to not seek the approval of others, which was constructed as the very indicator of the lack of confidence in the first place. There is a circularity in this linking of confidence and satisfaction with appearance that promotes confidence as a desirable characteristic because it does not look like lack of confidence.

Women without confidence are constructed as both deserving of sympathy and deficient or flawed through reference to internal character traits. Confidence and self-esteem are talked about as self-evidently desirable characteristics. It appears that women should be internally confident in order to not be construed as weak. Confidence, self-esteem and body-issues are therefore discursive resources young women draw on in talking about themselves, which makes it very interesting that none of them seem very well defined.

There was general reference to ‘body issues’ (Extract 1, line 2) or comments like ‘my body is not all that....’ (Extract 2, line 3). The only specific example, but one that turned up repeatedly, was concerns over slimness. It is interesting that most participants talked about young women having body issues yet other than slimness those issues were vaguely defined. Participant 2 says in Extract 1, line 9 that the beauty and diet industries are always ‘trying to convince women and girls that there is something wrong with them’ and this vagueness of ‘something wrong with them’ is echoed in the way participants refer to body issues without specifying what these are, other than concerns over ‘slimness’. That the participants talk about such issues in the plural strongly suggests they are referring to something farther reaching than slimness. Furthermore, using the word ‘issues’ and linking it with feeling insecure (Extract 1, line 3), construes unhappiness with the body as more of a general state of being, which may then be linked with mental health via concepts of insecurity and confidence.

As noted above, overcoming body-issues is presented as almost a milestone that can be achieved, although not automatically by growing older, but as a kind of wise, enlightened maturity. This wisdom and enlightened overcoming of an adolescence-related state is then used to position the speaker having achieved a maturity marker. When asked directly about whether they think of themselves as adults, the participants speak of different things as markers of adulthood (they referred to mortgages, careers, husbands and children). However, when talking about bodies, they narrate body-issues as belonging to an earlier stage, at least for them, individually. Overcoming body-issues can thus be interpreted as something individuals can use as a tool to demonstrate maturity, even if they cannot claim the current markers of adulthood. While these, arguably more tangible markers, may be beyond the women, at this age at least, they can, and do, talk about overcoming a problem of younger women, in a way that positions them as now older, wiser and more mature.

As this also is linked to overcoming external social pressures, these women use a narrative of progress towards maturity that relies on telling the self as individually strong and able to withstand external influences. Such a narrative relies heavily on canonical narratives of strong heroic loners overcoming obstacles without assistance. However, while allowing the speaker to take up the position of such a strong woman, it may simultaneously be a divisive and individualizing narrative.

Telling a story of having matured by overcoming external demands and rejecting social pressures not only pathologises those women who have not achieved this strength or maturity, but it also risks closing down possibilities for the speakers themselves to voice any concerns with demands about appearance or feelings of unhappiness with their bodies. Indeed, when I asked some participants directly if they would like to change anything about their bodies if that was possible, they either denied wanting to change anything or spoke about body parts that are not usually focused on by advertising and other media:

### **Extract 5**

Interview Participant 9, 1<sup>st</sup> interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 9: I wouldn't change anything (.) I love my scars I love the fact that my
- 2 eyebrows are never the same shape or the fact that my ears are tiny and nobody ever
- 3 notices that (...) I say it but I love that and everyone will be Oh my god they are that's
- 4 weird (..) I was like Yeah but that's weird for me and that's weird for me but that's me
- 5 and they will be It's actually not bad It's cute (.)

### **Extract 6**

Participant 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> interview, cafe

- 1 Participant 2: Erm (...) I'd like longer fingers (..) that's it

While virtually all the participants said that younger girls and some other women feel unhappy about their own bodies, body image evidently is also a subject that opens up possibilities for positioning oneself as a strong character, by talking of overcoming such unhappiness by learning to withstand external pressures. The flip-side of this is may be a foreclosing of speaking of any ongoing difficulties women may experience around appearance and pressures to live up to beauty standards, if this involves navigating a risk of being construed as weak.

### 6.1.3 Conflicting Performances in Talk and Body Presentation

One way of negotiating this dilemma of acknowledging body issues and distancing oneself from experiencing problems with one's own body is demonstrated in a vlog post, where the vlogger talks about feeling insecure about certain aspects of her body, while arguably showing of these body parts in a positive light.

#### Extract 7

Vlogger 5, Hannah Witton, from vlog 'Body Image and Body confidence'.

- 1 Vlogger 5: Everyone has their insecurities [upper body shot, long hair, make-up] I am  
2 insecure about my teeth [close up, straight white teeth] about my height [full body shot,  
3 slim, white] about my thighs [close-up of slim thighs in tights underneath shorts] and  
4 about my boobs [close-up of jumper] (..) But (..) I also really like my eyes [close-up] I  
5 like my waist [close-up, slim waist] I like my bum [close-up, wriggles bum], and I also  
6 like my boobs [close-up]

**Extract 8**, same vlog:

- 1 Vlogger 5: On a scale of really insecure to really confident I'm definitely more at the  
2 confident set of things but that doesn't stop me from feeling like shit when I want to  
3 rock a certain style or outfit but the fashion is made for somebody six inches taller than  
4 me with less boobs than me (...) it really makes me upset

**Extract 9**, same vlog:

- 1 Vlogger 5: One of my big top tips for body confidence is to get naked (.) like just take  
2 off your clothes and just hang out with yourself naked (.) just be naked with yourself (.)  
3 of course if that does make you uncomfortable I'm not gonna force you to be naked off  
4 course not I'm personally at a place when I feel happy being naked

Here it appears that presenting oneself as experiencing insecurities around the body lends authenticity to the speaker. She sets up body issues as something young women and girls in general experience, and by saying that she does too, she positions herself as 'one of them' (Extract 7, lines 1-3). In doing this, body insecurities become a resource the vlogger uses in her spoken discursive identity work.

By going on to elaborate which body parts she is insecure about while showing images of these that arguably match current beauty standards fairly closely, (slim, white, lines 1-3, large breasts, Extract 8, line 3), before going on to talk about being 'at a place where I feel happy being naked' (Extract 9, lines 3-4) she positions herself as acknowledging very real pressures, having overcome these, and arguably living up to these same pressures.

While the description of the vlogger and the body-parts mentioned by her are mine (e.g. that her teeth are straight and white, that she is white and slim and has large breasts) these descriptions are made while considering carefully whether others might challenge



them. I judged it unlikely these descriptions would be challenged; indeed, the claim that she is large breasted is further based on the vloggers own reference to this in extract 8, line 3, 'less boobs than me'.

The performance through actions, such as showing particular body-parts in close-ups and wriggling her bum, and performance through appearance such as wearing make-up, having long hair, and showing body-parts that match beauty standards, can be seen as performing conventional emphasized femininity. These images and her appearance are visual discursive resources that do different discursive work to what is being done in her talk. The performance in talk aligns the speaker with others who experience insecurities (Extract 7, line 1, 'everyone'), while the performance through appearance, presentation and actions align her with meeting socially valued beauty standards.

Dismissing the requirements in words while living up to them with images can be seen as a way of negotiating conflicting requirements to simultaneously dismiss and meet beauty requirements.

## **6.2 Trouble**

The body and orienting to it was often a potential source of trouble, either through the risk of failed performances of femininity, or trouble in inconsistent performances.

Conflicting performances in talk and body presentation can present a possible solution to navigating various versions of femininity but, conversely, can also present difficulties.

### **6.2.1 Risk of failed femininity**

In the following extract, the participant is talking about what kind of clothes she likes.

**Extract 10**, Participant 2, 2. Interview:

- 1 Participant 2: No I, I don't actually dress I like to dress up more when I'm at home and  
2 it's just me and the mirror and I just put on as much make up as I want
- 3 MP: yeah
- 4 Participant 2: Just a just a just for me cos (...) it's quite hard to explain (...) cos it's like  
5 (...) even if you're doing it for yourself (...) people have a problem with that because (...)  
6 it's always like (...) cos there's these external factors at play (...) which kinda tell me  
7 that am I really doing it for myself (...) so when I have that time alone by myself that's  
8 me like (...) being sexy just for me (...)
- 9 MP: So are you worried if you do it anywhere else (...) you're not sure whether it's just  
10 for you or for other people or
- 11 Participant 2: Ah I think for myself it's the most important (...) er it's just that when  
12 I'm dressed in a certain way (...) like in heels and stockings and make up and big big  
13 hair or whatever it's like (..) I have to act in a certain kind of way too and (..) that really  
14 restricts me and I feel very uncomfortable. So it's not always in terms of what I'm  
15 wearing but in terms of you know what kind of behaviour I have to give out in order to  
16 adhere to the kind of clothes I am wearing

The first part of this extract illustrates how women are currently expected to “understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen” (Gill, 2008, p. 45). When the participant says ‘just for me’ (line 4), the idea that dressing up and wearing make-up should be engaged in for oneself is present. But here it has the added concern that it should not *be seen* to be done to please others or to conform to societal expectations (lines 5-6). Evidently certain appearances, here dressing up and wearing make-up (lines 1-2), incur a risk of being read as doing femininity wrong by not genuinely doing it for oneself, but for others.

The second part of the extract highlights that not all women see themselves as invited to display highly emphasized femininity in front of others. Lines 12-14 strongly indicate that for this speaker, certain appearances and behaviours go together, and the behaviours, left unspecified, that she would have to perform if she was dressed in a certain way make her uncomfortable. It seems there is a risk of a failed performance of a certain version of femininity, should she not be able to match the behaviours to the appearance.

The risk of failure likewise comes across in the next extract, where another participant talks about dressing up as anime characters for anime conventions:

**Extract 11**, Participant 6, skype interview:

- 1 Participant 6: And very cute as well cute is very (.) cute is very big in Japan and like
- 2 where as in the west we tend to idolize the sexy they tend to idolize the cute so
- 3 MP: And do you like that
- 4 Participant 6: Erm (..) I kinda do yeah cos I'm suppose cos I'm small, like I'm I go for
- 5 cute image more than I go for sexy cos I think I just look stupid if I try and pull off sexy
- 6 so (...)

In this extract, the participant states overtly that she would 'look stupid' if she tried to 'pull off sexy' (line 5). 'Looking stupid' can in this context be interpreted as a failed performance of sexy femininity. Evidently, there is a risk of failed performance, if for some reason one cannot do it right, and here it seems that being small prevents a successful performance of sexy, while cute is doable. She does justify cute as a valid expression of femininity by emphasizing that it is 'big in Japan' (line 1), even if we do

not idolize it as much in the West. However, 'cute' is arguably also a version of sanctioned emphasized femininity in the west, making this a viable alternative for an occasioned display of emphasized femininity. It is further interesting, that the display of cuteness this participant is describing, was explicitly described as dressing up as a character, which may be another way of performing complex femininities. Performing femininity explicitly as performance, similar to theatrical performances, can be a way to engage with, while keeping some distance from, versions of emphasized femininity.

Holland (2004), cited in Dilley et al (2014) found that women challenging gendered norms also 'pursued recuperative strategies...[of] flash femininity to reassure others as to its authenticity' (p.150). In the above two extracts, assuring one's femininity does appear to require the ability to, on occasion, be able to perform some aspect of 'emphasized femininity'. The participants in this study, however, also drew on discursive resources of distancing themselves from preoccupations with appearance in order to position themselves as strong, mature and intelligent, as discussed in Section 6.1. While these participants talked about ways of doing emphasized femininity that they could pull off, either by doing cute as overt performance or getting dressed up at home, both talked about these activities as occasional. Indeed, while these were the most overt instances of talk about dressing up in explicitly recognizably feminine ways, there were no participants who talked about themselves as if they embodied emphasized femininity at all times, or claimed it as an intrinsic part of their character.

There is a strong pattern that presenting oneself as a kind of woman who is not overly preoccupied with appearance and appearing cute, sexy or feminine, is desirable. But, at the same time, it is desirable to present oneself as a woman who is capable of being cute or sexy, even though that is not all she is about.

It appears that a preoccupation with appearance can be seen as both giving in to social pressures and inauthentic. Arguably being seen to conform to social pressures in itself

incurs a potential accusation of ‘inauthenticity’, which in turn is construed as less valuable, as is made clear in the next extract. This extract also demonstrates how what is communicated by actions and body presentations forms an intrinsic part of the performances of femininity, and may not be read as coherent with what a woman is claiming.

Here Participant 3 is talking about pictures people post to Facebook:

**Extract 12**, Participant 3, 1st interview:

- 1 Participant 3: Yeah erm I went on a night out recently with a group of girls who are in
- 2 the first year, and I kinda noticed they’d gone missing at one point and I went in the
- 3 toilets and they were taking photos, and then I kinda they were Oh my god you get in
- 4 the picture get in the picture and they were all smile No no you have to pull a silly face
- 5 and I was like Oh why and I was ( ... ) and they were all pulling faces like they were
- 6 really drunk ( ... ) and a lot of them probably weren’t and then when we were on the
- 7 dance floor they were like kinda staging photos they were one girl was holding her arms
- 8 up like this (.) but she held her arms up like two or three minutes and so on for the
- 9 pictures being taken so they’ll have pictures on Facebook where on the surface it looks
- 10 like Oh we’re having a great time we’re dancing there we dancing oh my and we’re
- 11 drinking loads ( ... ) but having been on the night out with them I knew a lot of them
- 12 weren’t drinking very much a lot of them had early lectures.

In this extract the speaker is clearly ridiculing her friends’ efforts at appearing to embody a version of successful femininity by documenting having a good time. If this can be dismissed as inauthentic performance (line 5, ‘a lot of them probably weren’t’ and line 9-10 ‘having been on the night out with them I knew a lot of them weren’t drinking very much a lot of them had early lectures’) it is not a valid performance of femininity, at least if there is an attempt to pass it off as genuine. (In contrast, overtly

presenting oneself as performing or dressing up as a character, as participant 6 did in extract 11, may inoculate against such potential ridicule.)

The above extract also illustrates how the concept of ‘authenticity’ can be invoked to dismiss and ridicule people’s efforts at performing aspects of youthful femininity. It highlights that there is a risk of performances of femininity being construed as failed, if various aspects of the performances do not succeed or cohere.

### **6.2.2 Distancing From/Orienting to appearance**

Across the dataset, the participants do considerable rhetorical ‘dancing’ around simultaneously distancing themselves from and orienting to bodies, beauty and appearance.

As in the vlog Extracts 7-9, there were many instances of apparent contradictions with respect to appearance across the dataset. The next extract, however, is particularly interesting as the participant herself drew attention to what might be seen as contradiction.

#### **Extract 13**

Participant 2, 1.st interview, campus:

- 1 MP: I read in a report (.) about lad culture on campuses (.) that some women feel that
- 2 in order to speak up in class they have to be very confident that they look right and this
- 3 was more in terms of wearing makeup and so on (.) is that (.) have you noticed
- 4 anything like that (.) the people who speak look a certain way

5 Participant 2: Yeah (..) Yeah (.) I do (..) they just seem to have nice expensive clothes  
6 and flawless make-up [Laughter] and that kind of thing (..) erm (...) which I don't have  
7 all the time (...) the decision I had to wear makeup today (..) I don't really know (..) I  
8 was just wearing yesterday as well (.) I've got it on today(..)

9 MP: mm

10 Participant 2: But (...) it's true (.) you know(.) you're typically a pretty white girl with  
11 nice clothes, they all look the same (.) they have the same kind of style (.) it's like  
12 they're androids or something (..) I don't know.

In the latter part of this extract, and indeed several times earlier in the interview, the participant distanced herself from other people and their appearance, but her own appearance now seems to create a troubled position, in that the subject position of 'not like everyone else' has been rendered potentially implausible, by her own wearing of make-up. Her own appearance in the interview has now become relevant and something that she orients to, by almost making excuses for it Lines 6-8, '(...) the decision I had to wear makeup today (..) I don't really know (..) I was just wearing yesterday as well (.) I've got it on today(..)'. The appearance can then be interpreted as a mismatch with how she otherwise positions herself, as someone who does not want to look like the 'androids' who follow externally imposed beauty-standards. As 'androids' invokes images of unthinking machines, the participant may be heard as presenting herself as not only different to those other women she is describing but, importantly, as more of a thinking person than those who unthinkingly make themselves up to look like everyone else. However, taking up this subject position is interpreted by the participant herself as troubled by her wearing make-up, as she starts attempting to account for why she does this, while indicating that she does not always, do it. By including the word 'today' in her account, she marks it as something she does sometimes, but not always, before

abandoning the accounting and returning to the critique of those whom she has positioned as different to her.

This puts a slightly different twist on the occasioned emphasized femininity engaged in by the participants in the research by Dilley et al. (2014), who in the authors' interpretation, engaged in such practices to assure femininity. This participant, in this interaction, distances herself from such assuring of femininity by implying that she only wears make-up occasionally. Emphasized femininity can in this interaction be interpreted as potentially undermining her positioning of herself as a thinking woman who is different to the other women described.

Dilley et al.'s research specifically asked participants about their choices of footwear. Consequently, the participants in their study were reflecting in hindsight on various occasions when they had chosen 'emphasized femininity' by wearing high-heeled shoes. The analytic approach used here, while also eliciting talk about what women choose to wear when, recognises that participants complicate the categories of emphasized or not-emphasized femininity as it is often not simple or clear-cut whether a person is doing emphasized femininity or not. When the performances in talk and body presentation do different things, it becomes overly simplistic to try to make judgements about whether or not women are engaging in displaying emphasized femininity, or how any such engagement can or should be interpreted.

This participant's position became troubled when what might be communicated by her appearance appeared not to match the words she was speaking. It is worth noting that in my field notes I had recorded that it had not been obvious to me whether she was wearing make-up or not. Yet although she was not obviously wearing a lot of make-up, the participant evidently treated her own wearing of make-up as something that needed explaining, probably in light of the way she had been distancing herself from make-up wearing in the preceding parts of the interview. Thus, it appears that appearance and the



extent to which women can be read as embracing some forms of ‘emphasized femininity’ is never neutral or absent; rather, they can be held to account for their appearance regardless of how they look.

One of the interesting things about this extract is that the participant drew attention to the issue at all. It seems that appearance ‘speaks’ and speaks so loudly that it cannot be ignored, if it does not match the spoken words. Furthermore, the wearing of make-up can become ‘the wrong’ thing to ‘say’ over the course of a conversation. While Stuart and Donaghue (2011) (discussed in Chapter 3) found that the women in their research described wearing make-up as the default or neutral position while deviating from this required accounting for, the interaction in Extract 7 above indicates that even such a ‘presumed neutral’ appearance can unexpectedly become non-neutral and become something that needs accounting for. This indicates that it cannot be assumed that appearance can ever be considered a non-choice, or that the choice made will be ‘right’ for all situations encountered on a given day. It seems that ‘neutral’ cannot safely be assumed as what is expressed by appearance may be interpreted as appropriate in one situation but not in another.

This points to a dilemma for young women around questions of appearance and whether to wear make-up or not. Either decision may unexpectedly need accounting for, an accounting that may in itself produce troubled subject positions if the appearance and the views expressed appear not to match.

While it is not surprising to find that what is deemed appropriate appearance is context dependent, (most people will recognize the idea that they ‘should’ dress differently e.g. for work or a party), what is interesting is the detailed complexity of appearance and choices made regarding emphasized femininity. Young women’s appearance and choices around which aspects of emphasized femininity to take up can be brought to

attention in micro-level interactions, where appearance may be used to confirm or deny a claim to be a certain kind of person.

This participant can be seen as presenting herself along the lines of ‘I am the kind of person who doesn’t care about wearing make-up or looking like all the others’, a position that can be seen as becoming troubled when her appearance could be seen as not being consistent with this.

In light of the NUS report finding that some women in their research linked confidence about speaking in educational settings with confidence around their own appearance (Phipps, 2013), it seems that who can say what, and when, may be influenced by appearance in ways more subtle than any simplistic notion of ‘looking good’. Evidently, it may become problematic if what is expressed in talk can be seen to be contradicted by what others may assume is expressed by appearance. Wearing make-up may be read as performing femininity in a certain way, which may be interpreted as at odds with other performances of femininity. Thus, it may be that displaying versions of emphasized femininity by wearing make-up, makes it difficult to critique societal pressures for women to wear make-up, as the two performances can be read as contradictory. In light of the NUS report finding that some young women are reluctant to speak up if they are not looking ‘good’ (which most likely refers to some version or other of emphasized femininity) and Stuart and Donaghue’s finding that wearing make-up was seen as a neutral position while not wearing make-up was an active decision, young women are clearly navigating complicated territory around matching performances of femininity in talk and appearance. These complexities of what is communicated may limit the possibilities for what young women can say and do in given contexts and situations.

In this context, it becomes interesting that most vloggers embody some aspect of current beauty standards and/or emphasized femininity (e.g. being slim, wearing make-up, carefully styled hair and nails), which raises the question of whether this is necessary

for women to vlog in the first place. While it is difficult to define what ‘necessary’ would entail, that they practically all do it can be taken to demonstrate some level of ‘necessity’, at least in the sense that this may be one of the conventions around what a vlog by a woman looks like even as they vlog about body-image issues and the undesirability of pressures on young women and girls regarding appearance. There may thus be a risk that speaking against appearance-related pressures will be undermined by the appearance of the speaker. While vloggers do not draw attention to any potential mismatch the way Participant 2 did, it remains possible that messages spoken by women, even when they do not orient to what might be seen as contradictory, may be interpreted as such by others. Therefore, spoken critiques of pressures may be simultaneously undermined by appearance, as it may be that only women meeting certain standards of beauty or engaging in practices of emphasized femininity may be able to speak at all. (It is also worth noting that comments on YouTube vlogs by female vloggers often focus on the vlogger’s appearance.) In light of this, it hardly seems surprising that participants seem to be engaging with body-related subjects in complex and complicated ways.

Many participants did a to-and-fro ‘dance’ around claims not to worry about appearance while also orienting to it.

If we look at the first part of Extract 1 again:

Participant 2: I’d always tell her take pride in your appearance (..) in how you look, because when I was younger I had massive body issues (.) I don’t have any more I’ve overcome them but I think every girl grows up feeling insecure because of how they look so (...) I want to shield her from all you know all the crap like (... )

In this response to my question about what she would wish to be different for an imaginary daughter, the orientation to appearance and a claim that she would bring the issue up with a daughter, may seem at odds with the critique voiced by the same

participant of the beauty and diet industries. However, this engagement with appearance at the same time as repudiating the idea that it matters, was echoed across the data set. It may best be interpreted as indicative that while women may use a repudiation of caring about appearance to position themselves as strong individuals who have overcome youthful or immature weakness and impressionability, appearance cannot be forgotten.

### **6.2.3 Avoiding ‘Trouble’ via ‘Progress Narratives’**

I found during the process of identifying patterns emerging from the data, that the pattern I had labelled ‘progress narrative’ and the pattern labelled ‘distancing from/orienting to the body’ very often overlapped. In the following extract, Participant 8 is talking about going to the gym regularly. Previously in the interview she had talked about having had problems when she was younger with restricting food too much and becoming too thin:

#### **Extract 14**

Interview participant 8, 1.st interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 8: Yeah (... ) being short’s kind of my thing (... ) I guess when I was
- 2 younger I did want to be slimmer and obviously now (.) I like looking after myself now
- 3 in a healthy way and I like staying fit and healthy and feeling good so there’s always
- 4 that pressure () It’s quite hard to maintain a slim figure (...) or I find it quite difficult
- 5 anyway

The participant may be seen to be using a progress narrative in a way that constructs her current engagement with her body as better than when she was younger, even as she talks about the desirability of maintaining a slim figure. Given the recurring overlaps between the two patterns, it seems that employing a progress narrative is a way of negotiating the complicated dance of simultaneously distancing from and orienting to the body and any body-related issues. Given that participants so often did this, it seems that women cannot simply talk about experiencing difficulties with body image and their own bodies, without also narrating versions of this engagement that positions them as having progressed from previous, arguably weaker, positions.

Consider again the last part of extract 2:

Interviewer: Is there any part of your body that you would change in any way if you could (.) like with say a magic wand or something

Participant 9: No because I did that with hard work I didn't like my weight so I lost a bit

This response indicates not only that she progressed (via hard work), that she has obtained happiness with her own body, but also that her body is now slim enough.

## **6.3 Conclusion**

It is possible to discern a demand on young women to speak as if they were impervious to appearance related pressures, while also recognising that such pressures exist, and be able to talk about their own bodies in ways that meet current beauty standards, often in terms of slimness. As these seemingly contradictory positions may be a source of trouble in participants' talk about appearance, the progress narrative from susceptible to strong character is one way of navigating potential trouble involved in distancing from, while orienting to, appearance and body pressures, even if this is not a perfect or stable solution.

For some, it makes speaking of unhappiness with their own body and speaking of being susceptible to externally imposed pressures very difficult. For others, such as Participant 8 who did speak of difficulties with maintaining a slim body, it arguably entails a risk of being heard as not quite having progressed in the manner claimed.

One way around such a dilemma can be to talk about desires to maintain a slim body as a health issue rather than an appearance issue. Alternatively, as discussed, many participants situated concerns with weight as a younger girls' issue. While the related progress narrative enables the subject position of a 'strong character', it is interesting that it also often involves the speaker in a claim to have obtained an acceptable body.

The progress narrative may furthermore be seen as a narrative of increasing maturity, which itself becomes of interest in the light of suggestions, discussed in Chapter 2, that the current young generations are stuck in prolonged adolescence, because they do not have access to more traditional markers of adulthood. While the young women in this study may thus not have careers, mortgages or husbands and children, they do talk of themselves as more mature than they were when younger. It is possible that 'maturity', when told in relation to perceived external pressures in relation to their bodies, becomes a marker of progress towards adulthood which young women can use to distinguish themselves from younger girls, or those who may be seen as not having reached this sense of self, in the absence of other, more traditional markers of 'maturity'.

Young women orient to their own bodies in highly complicated ways, that often include both distancing themselves from vulnerability to externally imposed expectations or beauty ideals, and positioning themselves as strong characters in doing so, while meeting at least some of these beauty ideals. That claiming not to be affected by societal beauty standards was so frequently used as an indicator of personal strength, suggests further complications in women's engagements with beauty practices, beyond debates over their agency. Beyond any actual engagements in beauty practices, the concept of

body image in relation to externally imposed beauty standards is also something women use as a discursive resource in their identity work, and they largely talk about it in terms of beauty standards causing women unhappiness with their own bodies, which in turn is linked with lack of confidence. This is also talked about as a weakness, and something the speakers themselves have overcome.

Women's engagements with beauty practices, both in actual appearance-related practices and in their talk, cannot be sufficiently analysed by focussing on whether they are best seen as cultural dupes, engaging in objectifying practices uncritically, or knowing choosers who engage in selected practices for their own enjoyment (Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Evans et al. 2010). While they may engage in such practices on occasion, and carefully construct claims that they are doing so for their own enjoyment, they also critically distance themselves from external pressures, both by claiming to not personally be affected, and by highlighting the negative impacts such beauty ideals have on other, usually younger, women. Young women are quite clearly drawing on discourses of beauty ideals as negative, but as vulnerability to external pressures is framed as lack of maturity or weakness, rather than being unequivocally liberating for women to be able to critique such pressures, it may add a layer of complication for young women to navigate both distancing from and engaging with appearance related matters.

While most women in this study repudiated the idea that appearance matters, many talked about themselves in terms of having made efforts to achieve elements of 'emphasized femininity' in the meaning of 'culturally sanctioned and understood desirable femininity'. While some did this by talking about having achieved a slim body, others echoed Dilley et. al.'s findings of doing occasioned 'flash' femininity (i.e. displaying traditional markers of emphasised femininity such as make-up or frilly underwear), which suggests that, as Dilley et al. found in their research, some young

women assure their femininity by engaging in appearance-related emphasized femininity. However, in light of the further findings of this study, that performances of femininity in talk, and performances in appearance may not always cohere, it appears that one known version of intelligible femininity which involves distancing oneself from engagement with conventional beauty practices can be troubled by one's appearance. This highlights that there are several ways of doing femininity, but some performances, such as wearing make-up, may be construed as negating other performances, such as positioning oneself as a critically thinking woman.

As there appears to be a risk of failure if one does not do femininity 'correctly', performing emphasized femininity through appearance while critiquing it in words may be one way of simultaneously performing both desirable femininity in terms of appearance and critically thinking womanhood. However, there is a risk that such performances may appear inconsistent and thus need explaining or defending.

The achievement of assured femininity is evidently temporary and situated. As the 'right' kind of femininity involves disparate criteria (e.g. critically thinking, sexy, slim or cute), it seems that both talk and appearance and actions are used to perform various aspects of femininity, but again this risks being seen as incoherent or inauthentic.

These findings suggest that successful femininity is not a constant. It is not something that would be achievable if only a woman could find the exactly right appearance. To perform femininity successfully, in a way that is 'not troubled' depends on balancing the various aspects of the performances. Performing conflicting versions of femininity simultaneously can be an alternative way for young women to meet demands that seem incompatible or contradictory.



## **Chapter 7 The qualities of the ‘Ideal Young Woman’**

Chapter 6 explored the ways young women’s talk orients to bodies, appearance and ‘femininity’. This chapter explores how particular versions of young women are constructed as ideal in the ways young women talk about themselves and others. When talking about self and others, some qualities feature more often than others, and various qualities are treated as self-evidently desirable or undesirable. The chapter focusses on which qualities emerge as relevant to young women today, and which are treated as desirable, to the point of constructing what the ideal young woman is and does. The constructions of some qualities as desirable often involves a demarcation of such a quality, as much of the talk involved constructing too much of a quality, such as ‘confidence’, as undesirable. By talking about certain qualities as self-evidently good, and others bad, certain ways of being emerge as the ideal young woman.

Section 7.1 analyses how the qualities of ‘confidence’, the ‘right mind-set’, ‘working on the self’ and liking oneself emerge as constituent parts of the ideal young woman today. In section 7.2, I explore the limits constructed around these qualities in the talk, particularly the ways too much confidence and too much controlling of the self is constructed as undesirable or harmful.

The talk of both the vloggers and the interviewees sets out what the right kind of young woman is. There are some commonalities that recur across the dataset, that construct ideal, or good, young women as confident and constantly working on themselves to self-improve and be the right sort of person. In constructing this ideal person, the way the participants talk also sets limits on what she should be. This ranges from limiting how confident she should be to carefully negotiating how she works on herself. From the data, it seems clear that the Ideal young women continually self-improves, takes responsibility for her own self-improvements and monitors her own self. However, this

may lead to trouble when the control itself needs to be controlled, and Section 7.2.

discusses in more detail how the self-improvements and controlling of the self is talked about as potentially problematic.

## **7.1. Ideal young women**

### **7.1.1 Ideal young women are confident**

I asked the interview participants about whether people at their university tended to be confident, and many participants responded by talking about having themselves overcome an earlier lack of confidence. Similarly to the way participants drew on narratives of progress as a resource in Chapter 6, this resource was drawn on in relation to confidence. In doing so, the participants constructed the ‘ideal young woman’ as someone who is confident by talking about overcoming their own lack of confidence as an improvement.

In this extract, where the participant talks about how she herself got over a lack of confidence, there is a strong implication that a lack of confidence is something to be overcome, which was typical across the interviews:

**Extract 1**, Interview Participant 1, 1.st interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 1: for me (..) for the first semester (.) I wasn’t confident enough to speak
- 2 up about what I thought about a particular topic in class (..) just
- 3 because I felt like I would be wrong and I would be laughed at or
- 4 something but I think that was a personal thing and I got over that.

As well as a lack of ‘confidence’ being something to be overcome, in the above extract the participant links ‘confidence’, or a lack of it, with concerns about being wrong or laughed at. While the connection is not elaborated on, ‘confidence’ is in some non-exact way intertwined with being wrong or laughed at. This may be seen as similar to the idea

observed more broadly that women have to be ‘right’ or beyond potential judgement as ‘laughable’ in order to speak. The reluctance to speak up when there was a possibility she could be wrong, can be interpreted in this light, even though the participant presents this as ‘a personal thing’. When she explains it this way, she clearly locates this issue in the individual, with the added implication that this is also an issue the individual should overcome by herself. In other words, it is not constructed here as a structural phenomenon, but a personal way of being and thinking. As she goes on to say she ‘got over that’, it can further be seen as an achievement to change oneself to address this issue.

It is also interesting that while the question was asked about people at their university generally, this participant, as did many others, responded with answers about herself. While confidence was treated as a desirable quality, it seems to be a quality that is nonetheless quite vague and more easily talked about with examples from personal lives.

Confidence as simultaneously necessary and vague is referred to by the next participant as well, as she talks about what she would want for a future daughter:

**Extract 2**, Interview Participant 4, 1.st interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 4: So (..) I'd definitely be very careful not to say anything about her
- 2 appearance or my own appearance that was negative in front of her
- 3 because I think no matter how academically well you perform I think
- 4 it all boils down to how confident you are and if you haven't got any
- 5 confidence you're going to really struggle
- 6

In this extract, confidence is something people need, as they are otherwise going to struggle. Confidence is something that can be shaped, it is not a fixed state, but interestingly, the participant here relates it explicitly to appearance. Negative comments about appearance causes lack of confidence, which is contrasted with doing well academically, which cannot make up for a lack of confidence. Confidence is thus not derived from doing well academically, but from appearance. It is left unclear what it is the person will struggle with, without confidence, in the example of doing well academically, but it is clear that women and girls need confidence in a general, if vague, way. When the participant says ‘it all boils down to’ (line 3) it is not clear what the ‘it’ in that sentence refers to. However, the vagueness itself suggests that a discourse of confidence as a crucial characteristic for individuals to possess is so widespread, that it is intelligible to talk about how important it is, without any need to precisely specify how it works, what ‘it’ is it boils down to, or why it is so central. That the extract is intelligible even without precision, shows how the idea of confidence, as a concept and as an ideal, has become widely available as a discursive resource which can be used as explanation, and by extension prescriptively as a solution to potential struggles.

The benefits of confidence are further evident in the following extract:

**Extract 3**, Participant 5, 1.st Interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 5: what happened was we had a speaker come in and she (..) I think on
- 2 that one it was just about financial stability and so many women
- 3 opened their eyes hang on a minute I could do this I can do that and I
- 4 don’t have to be a man I don’t have to have this amount of money (..),
- 5 I don’t have to look like this or be like that (..) but anybody can do
- 6 it(..) and in seeing that (..) like I met up with some of them recently
- 7 (..) I don’t want to say that that changed and made them get good
- 8 grades but it changed their perception of themselves because before

- 9                           that they were saying I would be happy with a two-two and one of  
10                           them has got a first
- 11     MP:                Ah
- 12     Participant 5: Because        she        believed        in        herself        (..)

Although this is not directly about struggles people will face if they are not confident, there is an almost evangelical notion that if only young women believe in themselves, they can overcome anything. Confidence and belief in oneself are here presented as an almost magical solution, and you do not need ‘to be a man’, ‘have this amount of money’ or ‘look like this or that’, (lines 3 and 4) as long as you ‘believe in yourself’ (line 10). While she qualifies that she is not claiming that ‘seeing that’ made some people get good grades (lines 5 and 6), she emphasizes that their changed ‘perception of themselves’ (line 7) was linked with getting better degrees than they had would have been happy with before. She further underlines the causal link between confidence and achievement when she adds ‘because she believed in herself’ (line 10).

### **7.1.2. Ideal young women have the right mindset**

Across the dataset there was quite a lot of talk about ‘mindsets’, and having the right kind of mindset. In the following extract, the speaker is talking about different types of people and friendship groups at university. It is evident here that the right kind of student takes responsibility for herself to belong at university. There is a clear sense that there are equal opportunities for everyone, but it is a matter of personal agency to be a ‘good’ student.

**Extract 4**, Interview Participant 3, 1.st Interview, campus:

- 1     Participant 3: as long as you’re sort of willing to commit your time to like (.) to like  
2                           just studying and stuff like I joke about how I don’t really(.) how I

3                   should do more studying but yes I turn up to seminars (.) I turn up to  
4                   lectures like I think as long as everyone here their focus is the  
5                   university at the end of the day  
6  
7    MP:           Yeah  
8  
9    Participant 3: Like you are here for that reason (..) so I think there's space for  
10                  everyone providing you're willing to commit to an academic kind of  
11                  purpose (..) and people who I've seen who weren't willing to do that  
12                  kind of dropped out (.) or (.) a friend of mine from home (.) you know  
13                  (.) she was going to (.) she went to university she lasted six weeks and  
14                  she came home  
15  
16   MP:           Oh okay  
17  
18   Participant 3: Because it wasn't for her (..) it wasn't (.) she hadn't gone with the  
19                  right kind of mindset she'd kind of gone with this like oh this is like a  
20                  three year long party and then she realised it's actually quite hard (...)  
21                  she was studying (..) what was she studying nursing it was either  
22                  nursing or childcare (...), something like that a local university in the  
23                  north and so she lasted six weeks and she came home and got a job  
24                  and she was just like It wasn't what I was expecting

The speaker constructs it as a matter of having the right mindset whether a person is successful at university. The right kind of mindset involves having the 'will' to study and making an effort (lines 9 and 10). The sentence 'there's space for everyone

providing you are willing to commit' (lines 8 and 9), reflects a widely available discourse of meritocracy. In this context, it suggests it is a matter of agency and choice whether university study is the right thing for a person or there is 'a space' (line 8) for them there. In this construction, fitting in at university becomes a matter of personal choice. The emphasis on 'will' to commit, study, attend seminars and have the right kind of mindset constructs a subject position of 'the good student' as someone who works as hard on herself as she works on her coursework. It seems being a student and university life is as much about shaping the right self, one who has the right attitude to commitment and studying, as it is about the content of the course the student is studying or the environmental conditions in which it is being studied.

### **7.1.3. Ideal young women work on themselves to produce a controlled self**

The idea that ideal young women work on themselves is further expressed in the following extract, where the speaker links working on the self with building confidence. In this extract, she is talking about the joys and benefits of dancing:

**Extract 5**, Interview Participant 5, 1.st interview, campus

- 1 Participant 5: It's enjoyable because it's the one time where you're stress free (.)  
2 you're focussing on something that you want to do but in the same  
3 way there's a benefit for yourself (..) and then when you are doing  
4 some of these things you feel extra cool extra sexy (..) you are able to  
5 do it because that (inaudible) thing and I am good at it because you are  
6 repeating it and then there's that extra confidence and extra strength  
7 (...) you kind of have this thing where no one can tell me anything  
8 afterwards (..) so once you are in that mood yep I feel great (.)  
9 nobody can tell me anything so it was great and it is still is (..) my  
10 friends would laugh at me when I do that now but when they do it  
11 with me they are oh my god they will forget whatever it is they were

12 thinking about (..) and you need that in your life (.) you need a  
13 complete stress relief where it's not even in the back of your mind (.)  
14 your mind is free for that minute (...) and what I have noticed as well  
15 (.) my body became a lot more relaxed and in my body becoming a lot  
16 more relaxed I didn't have as much breakage anymore (.) my face is a  
17 lot clearer my body was a lot clearer (.) my body is a lot slimmer  
18 because I de-stressed (...) it was like a full complete cleansing (....)  
19 that was (inaudible) and then now I do a lot of workshops and classes  
20 and with the dancing I find it very similar to yoga and Pilates (..)  
21 which is if I had known I am not going to dance (.) I will do that and  
22 still get the same benefit in that (...) so initially it was yeah (..) I want  
23 to lose weight but now it becomes the thing of it's part of my life (..) I  
24 can't go a day without not doing yoga or one of the two or whatever

In the descriptions of the benefits of dancing and gaining confidence from it, the participant is also describing herself as working on the self to combat stress. She sets up dancing as something she is doing because she wants to do it, and adding 'but in the same way there is a benefit for yourself' (line 2), before going on to list the many benefits.

When listing the benefits for the body, her talk emphasises how her body has become more relaxed, her face has become clearer and her body is now slimmer (lines 13, 14 and 15). This list is presented as self-evidently desirable effects, whereby her dancing can be understood as improving her body. The effects on her mind are not described as much in terms of lasting benefits. However, the assertion that 'you need that in your life (.) you need a complete stress-relief where it's not even in the back of your mind (.) your mind is free for that minute' (Lines 10, 11 and 12), constructs life as inherently



stressful while people also need stress relief. It is left unclear what causes stress and why people need stress relief, but the assertion that this is a necessity works to construct the stress-relieving dancing as an activity that is not just good but necessary. It is left implicit that stress-relieved minds are somehow better than stressed minds. Thus, the dancing is presented as not only improving her body, but also her mind, where confidence and being stress-free and having a 'free' mind forms a part of this, however temporarily, free and improved self.

This 'freedom' involves carefully producing a healthy, impervious-to-others self. The described activity of dancing as enjoyment and free living in the moment is also presented as a package of carefully controlled and managed freedom. The assertion that 'your mind is free for that minute' in the context of the listed benefits for the body, the need for de-stressing the mind and the inclusion of 'nobody can tell me anything' (line 7) as a self- evidently desirable effect, construct a conceptualisation of freedom that is carefully aligned with values in relation to slim bodies and stress-free resilient minds. The freedom presented is thus a freedom from flaws such as stress, less slim bodies and less clear skin and less imperviousness to what others might say.

It is further interesting that this extract is a reflection by a woman on herself, where the speaker is one step removed from the self which is here a phenomenon to be talked about and reflected on. When she justifies and evaluates the benefits for mind and body of dancing, this dancing self becomes a managed project. Thus, the freedom involved is not a freedom from evaluation, as the freedom becomes an item on a list of benefits that constructs ideals for young women. Ideal young women are constructed as, at least on occasion, free, but this freedom becomes a virtue to be evaluated. Freedom here is carefully managed as part of a larger package of benefits.

Although it may sound highly convoluted to say that young women engage in management of selves which are engaged in reflecting on self-management, it is neither

unusual or unintelligible. Such self-management of a self, engaged in reflecting on self-management, comes across very clearly in the next extract.

This extract is a section of a transcript of a 5-minute vlog called ‘Manifesto Redux’. A link to the vlog can be found in Appendix E. This is a diary/confessional style vlog, which is one of the recognisable formats of YouTube vlogging. The vlogger is talking about how she is and how she feels, which contributes to making this vlog appear as if it is an ‘authentic’ look into her ‘true’ inner feelings and thought processes. This vlog is presented to viewers as an account of how she is, but as she pauses, thinks and rephrases without editing the whole into a more ‘slick’ or polished finished product, the vlog comes across as not only a look into her inner self, but also as a glimpse of the feelings and thought processes as she is working through them, that is, a look into her thought processes as they unfold. This is a reflection on the self, and pronouncing on the self, as the vlog unfolds.

1   **Extract 6**, Vlogger 1, Elliesandpancakes, vlog entitled “Manifesto Redux”:

2                           ...it’s actually a year ago today that I did a video response to  
3                           Rosianna on below her original video she posted this video entitled  
4                           manifesto and it was like a list of goals for herself and that’s what I  
5                           did too (...) and considering it’s been a year I just wanted to like  
6                           reflect (.) and see whether I’d actually fulfilled those goals (..) It was a  
7                           really weird experience watching the video back (.) cos I know it’s a  
8                           video and obviously I edited it (.) and I put my best foot forward and  
9                           stuff but (.) just the zest I had I’m gonna do this I’m gonna do this and  
10                          I remember that as a period of my life that I was really determined to  
11                          go like this self-improvement kick and I had a lot of like energy (..) I  
12                          know a lot of that comes from at the time I had just come out of a  
13                          really severe depression and was wanted had this whole sense of

14                               wanting to live life to the full it's a cliché but it was really heart felt  
15                               and I just don't feel that as intensely now

The part of the extract that is of interest here, is how the speaker presents it as self-evident and good that a young woman wants to improve herself. 'Living life to the full' (line 12) is clearly linked with implementing and managing self-improvements in the manifesto of things she wanted to do and changes she wanted to implement a year earlier (lines 8 and 9). While she thus links having plenty of energy with wanting to improve the self, it is not explained why feeling good and energetic should mean a person would want to change or improve herself. Indeed, it is imaginable that a person could argue that they did *not* want or need to improve themselves when they were feeling good and energetic. However, the logic presented here is rather the opposite; that it is precisely when feeling good and energetic that it is viable to strive for, and indeed want, self-improvement. In this talk, wanting to improve is clearly linked with feeling good, which constructs a desire to improve as a desirable state in itself.

She goes on to justify not having the same driven energy to implement changes at the moment as she did then, by saying that she has made changes:

**Extract 7:** Immediately following Extract 6 in the vlog:

1                               (..) it feels weird admitting that cos obviously everyone wants to live  
2                               like everyone wants to live (.) make the most of this life but the  
3                               feeling just isn't as strong because the memory of going through  
4                               something that horrific just isn't as fresh and I guess as something I  
5                               kinda actively avoid feeling that really because it is just unpleasant to  
6                               think about and at the same time I know I have changed and I have  
7                               made improvements on the things that I wanted to improve on

It is interesting that rather than just say that she does not have the same energy as she did immediately after coming out of depression, she tells viewers that she has made changes (Lines 5 and 6). It appears that by assuring us that she is the kind of person who does do self-improvement, she is a good person. After this, she can go on to elaborate on not being focused on improvements at the moment.

That wanting to improve is a desirable quality that is linked with feeling good and energetic is further made clear in the next extract:

**Extract 8:** (following immediately after Extract 7)

- 1 and something I definitely know about myself is I'm not good at rec-  
2 like most people are not good at actually recognizing when change  
3 happens so (..) in terms of like real solid structural change erm  
4 probably a lot has gone on even though I don't have that same level (.)  
5 I guess it's impossible to keep that level that high up all the time(.)

In this extract, making changes and self-improvement are constructed as good; people are doing themselves a disservice when they do not recognize that they have made changes (lines 1 and 2), described here in terms that sound like not giving themselves enough credit when not recognizing changes that have happened. However, change is also constructed as something that requires energy. It is described as impossible to keep up the needed level of energy all the time (Lines 4 and 5). In Extract 9 she goes on to elaborate that she is not at 'a good point' at the moment, which serves as explanation for not having the energy for changes.

### Extract 9:

- 1 I guess it's like a spiral metaphor like in terms of like I  
2 had cognitive behavioural therapy and one of the things they talk  
3 about there is the sense of like (.) if

4                   you're coming back to the same problem  
 5                   again after a period of time and like it feels like you haven't made  
 6                   any progress when actually you have you are actually just spiraling  
 7                   up (.) I feel a bit weird making this video now I feel like right now  
 8                   I'm at one of my not so good points (.) being mean to myself and stuff  
 9                   and there's a valid reason for that and I know it will pass so (..) I guess  
 10                  it's just something I have to live with for now (..)

The way wanting to change and make improvements is talked about in the extracts from this vlog, it is clear that wanting to change is desirable but requires that the person is at a good enough point to want it (Line 6). It is striking, that while the construction that those who are already at a good point and full of energy are those who would want to improve and change could have been construed as illogical, there is no sense of illogicality about the way the vlogger talks about her various good and not so good points in relation to self-improvement.

The vlogger further elaborates on making changes and changing the self by talking about working on herself forever:

**Extract 10:**

1                   I guess I think one of the things I feel even more now is I'll never get  
 2                   to like an end point where I can say yep I'm done as a person it'll be  
 3                   something that I'll always be kind of be continually working on (.)

This goes beyond drawing on known narrative resources of people developing throughout the lifespan, as she is specifically talking about *working* on the self (line 3). Arguably, this view of the self as a project to be worked on throughout the lifespan, is different to earlier views of development, where people might be thought to move

through life stages as an inevitable process of getting older, without needing to work on changes.

This view of what a self is suggests a perpetually accountable and responsible subject, rather than, for example, a biologically unfolding being or someone who matures simply by living in the world. This kind of self, or subject, requires more; that is, it requires work, as this self goes through the lifespan. Where Giddens (1991) talked about people in the late modern age being responsible for forging their own biographies, this conceptualization of the person clearly goes a lot further. It is not specified what the work on the future self will, or should, involve, or indeed what would be the consequences if someone did not continually work on their self. However, it is clear that not only is it the responsible thing to do, it is what a self or a 'subject' is taken to be. In other words, a self is something that is produced by individuals through their work on their selves. A self then seems to be simultaneously a product made by an individual continually engaged in doing this work and engaged in monitoring its progress.

This is a very complex construction produced through drawing on several known discursive resources. There are discernible elements of narratives of people developing throughout life, combined with known discourses of people being responsible for their own selves, as well as discourses of people being required to improve themselves.

These elements can be seen as existing resources that in new combinations produce new meanings and subject positions.

#### **7.1.4. Ideal Young women like themselves**

Part of the work on the self that needs to be done on the self is to like oneself. In the following extract ‘being harsh’ on herself and not genuinely liking herself is used by the speaker to position herself as not being at a good point right now:

**Extract 11**, Vlogger 1, Manifesto Redux:

- 1                   (.) and I think definitely in terms of not being really harsh on myself  
2                   and stuff in the past year I have gone a few periods weeks where I  
3                   have managed to just like genuinely like myself and not be really  
4                   awful to myself but then there have been times when I haven’t done  
5                   that and so (.) I don’t know (.)

Read in the context of the other extracts from this vlog, it emerges that people who are at a ‘good point’ simultaneously work to improve themselves and also like themselves (lines 2 and 3). The notion that liking oneself is good is quite clearly expressed here while being ‘awful’ to oneself is something to work on avoiding (line 2). The being awful to oneself is linked with ‘being at a not so good point’ whereby her state of mind is constructed as an explanation both for not liking herself and being awful to herself. It is clearly expressed in this talk that she deserves to like herself, and it is undesirable for her to be at a not-so-good point where she is awful to herself.

The next extract likewise comes from a vlog in the diary style, and similarly this vlogger is reflecting on how being harsh on yourself is bad thing. The context here is the way she talks about herself and her abilities.

**Extract 12**, Vlogger 6, LakminiW, from vlog entitled “Too much self deprecation!”:

- 1                   I’m at university now and before I came to university at my school  
2                   self-deprecation was the thing that was done (.) we were all just like  
3                   I’m so rubbish at this and everyone else would be like I’m so rubbish  
4                   at this (.) and there was a mutual understanding that even if I said that

5 I'm rubbish at something and somebody else said they were rubbish at  
6 something that you both sort of knew that we weren't really rubbish at  
7 it (.) but then coming to university I'd be like oh I'm really bad at  
8 economics and then everyone would just be like okay (..) there wasn't  
9 necessarily that mutual understanding it was like okay I'm going to  
10 stop self-deprecating because it's just stupid and having talked to a lot  
11 of people about it I mean it is essentially lying like it is part of a  
12 culture that is slightly unhealthy if you're just saying how bad you are  
13 all the time like you don't think that has an effect on you but I  
14 definitely think that it does so I definitely reduce the amount I self-  
15 deprecate since coming to university (..) I think it's been good for me  
16 I think that it's a good thing I think the reason that we do it is because  
17 it definitely lowers expectations

In this extract, speaking negatively about one's own abilities is presented as unhealthy (line 10), and as it is unhealthy it is something to avoid. This can be seen as management of the self and one's own mental health. The speaker is taking up a position for herself as a good and responsible young woman, and a good student, by reflecting on her own behaviour and its effects on her mental health (line 11 and 12). The ideal self is presented here as being kind to herself and careful of her mental well-being by taking responsibility for her own state of mind. As in Extract 11, there is an implicit notion that young women have a right to talk positively about themselves, and when she talks about self-deprecating as having an effect, it is implicit that they have a right to feel good about themselves.

This suggests that being at 'a good point' is more to do with a state of mind, e.g. feeling energetic and not being harsh on oneself, than it is to do with factors and people outside the individual. Extracts 6-11 from Vlogger 1 further suggest that the aim of being at a



good point is to be able to like the self, and even have the energy to improve, and to want to improve one self.

There is a sense in both vlogs, that all young women deserve to like themselves, which can be seen as a way of constructing young women that has taken some notions of equality into account. However, the capability for self-liking is here linked with an intra-individual state of mind, for example by Vlogger 1's reference to cognitive behavioural therapy in Extract 9, and the talk of being at a 'not so good' point right now.

In Chapter 3 I discussed Rose's (1998) argument that people in modern liberal democracies come to understand themselves as certain kinds of responsible and enterprising subjects, not least via the language of therapy and psychology, or in his terms 'experts of the psyche', and expert techniques which promise happiness and fulfillment via 'responsibilization' of the self. In the above extract, the language of therapy or 'experts of the psyche' can be seen to have become a discursive resource to draw on. This resource of psychologizing language here combines with discourses of individuals as responsible for themselves, as well as with a discourse of entitlement to happiness.

There may be something radical about the notion that all young women are entitled to like themselves. Certainly, it is now fairly common for mainstream media and politicians to discuss the negative effects certain media images are alleged to have on young women, particularly in relation to body image. The notion that young women have entitlements can be seen as a feminist-like development, in so far as the assumption that young women are entitled to well-being, or even have entitlements at all simply by being, can be seen as a form of what McRobbie (2009) described as 'feminism taken into account'. The above extract certainly indicates the availability of

discursive resources of female entitlement for young women to draw in in their talk about themselves.

However, as argued by McRobbie (2015) and Gill and Donaghue (2013), there is something remarkably individualistic about this wellbeing to which young women are assumed entitled. The entitlement to wellbeing that is expressed as common-sense, both in the data analysed here and the rhetoric used in discussion of harmful effects of media images, concerns states of mind of individuals, not, for example, possibilities for young women as a group. Although feminist-like ways of talking about entitlements for young women are now available as discursive resources to draw on, these resources are mixed with individualistic, psychologising discourses available to talk about people and mental health. This arguably produces an individualistic kind of feminist-like entitlement.

The problem associated with ‘not being at a good point’ is here constructed as relating to how the individual is able to relate to herself, for example whether she can like herself and find the energy to want to work on self-improvements. However, it is remarkable that the well-being is only talked about in these vlogs in terms of the individual relating to herself, not in terms of the individual relating to others, or others relating to her. Likewise, any notion of her well-being being affected by external contexts is absent, almost as if ‘selves’ are minds existing in isolated bubbles, where the self, and only the individual self, works to shape this self. Part of the work that needs doing by this insular self is to forge a self that likes herself. Such a conceptualization of the self and its obligations draws on wider societal rhetoric, again especially noticeable in relation media images that may cause negative body image.

McRobbie (2009) argued that a post-feminist sensibility takes elements of feminism into account, while leaving structural inequalities intact and without becoming a danger to men. The rhetoric around body image follows a similar pattern, as official activities

will protect young women against images that may cause negative body image. Thus, in June 2016, the mayor of London, Sadiq Kahn moved to ban images from transport networks in London that “promote unrealistic expectations about body image and health” (Jackson, 2016). This can be seen as supporting the entitlement of young women to like themselves, and a willingness to work to remove some obstacles that are seen as being in the way of young women achieving this. However, while official activities may notionally temper blatant obstacles, the focus remains on how young women relate to themselves in their own minds. Again, this is focused on effects inside individual women’s minds, not, for example, on how women are represented more broadly and what impacts such representations have on others, including men, and how they relate to women. This can be seen as a trade-off, where on the one hand images promoting negative body images will be critiqued, while on the other, the problematic effects of such images are seen as located inside women’s heads.

In recent years ‘radical self-love’ has emerged as both a concept, a book (Darling 2016) and, according to Darling, a movement. Extracts 11 and 12 show that self-liking is close to also being an obligation, as it is something young women will work to achieve, and that young women cannot always live up to this. Furthermore, liking or loving the self is seen as a matter of how the self relates to the self and works on the self, divorced from how women are positioned by others. This concept of self-love or liking reinforces notions that solutions to problems with what a woman thinks of herself are to be found inside her mind, which arguably makes it somewhat less than radical.

Self-liking, as a discursive resource, emerges as simultaneously a right, an obligation, a solution to problems, a state to be achieved by working on the self (if need be with the help of therapy) and a state to be obtained for the sake of having the energy to self-improve. This looks as if feminism is taken into account, but it is a feminism that is no longer dangerous because it does not threaten the status quo, or men, as it is focused on

the insides of women's heads. Interestingly, particularly in the vlog cited in Extract 6-11, it is not questioned, or presented as contradictory, that women should both improve and like themselves as they are.

The self that is presented by Vlogger 1 can be seen as a troubled self, in two ways.

Firstly, by her own description, the vlogger is at 'one of her not so good points', which indicates she is taking up a position as troubled. Secondly, as some of the issues she is talking about struggling with can be seen as attempting to meet contradictory demands, she seems to be contending with ideological dilemmas (Billig et al. 1988, cited in Edley, 2001), which are here producing trouble in identity work (e.g. Taylor, 2007). When she says "but then there have been times when I haven't done that and so (.) I don't know (.)" (Extract 11, lines 3-4), the pause and 'I don't know' indicates trouble.

As her talk involves struggles with both liking herself and taking responsibility for improving herself, it seems difficult for someone to simultaneously meet both demands. On the logic that if someone liked herself enough, she would not also see herself as someone who needed to change and improve (and conversely, if someone identified aspects of themselves that needed changing and improving, this could easily be seen as being harsh on themselves or not liking themselves enough), it becomes contradictory or nonsensical to talk about trying to do both. However, it is very noteworthy that the vlog does not come across as inconsistent. When she talks about her 'not so good point' and depression, this is language that it is assumed viewers will understand (and indeed, looking at the comments under this video they did). Evidently, trouble in identity work presented as a self that is struggling with negotiating the managing of the self, comes across as an intelligible way of performing young womanhood.

## 7.2. Not too much! The limits of the ‘good’ person

### 7.2.1. Don’t be too confident

While the values and virtues of confidence were asserted in the talk analysed in Section 1.1, this section looks into the limits put on confidence. It is expressed overtly in the next two extracts that being, or appearing, too confident is bad. In the following extract a participant is speculating on what she would like to be different for a daughter, should she have one, one day:

**Extract 13**, Interview Participant 4, 1st interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 4: So (..) I'd want her to be not one of these people you meet where you  
2 just want them to calm down not cocky just quietly confident in  
3 themselves (...) yeah.

Confidence is here constructed as desirable, but it is also possible to be too confident. ‘Quietly confident’ is constructed as different to people you want to ‘calm down’, people who are ‘cocky’. Apparently there is no need to explain why you would want them to calm down or what is bad about being cocky. But whatever the reason, this is not ideal for a young woman.

The notion of too much confidence becoming something else which is undesirable is also illustrated in the next extract. The participant had been speaking about overcoming her own lack of confidence when she came to university, and went on to say:

**Extract 14**, Interview Participant 6, 1.st interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 6: one of my friends she was friends with a guy who we totally ignore  
2 now and we just take the mick out of him all the time (..) but there’s  
3 this guy on my course (..) and he is really arrogant (..) really really  
4 arrogant (..) he’ll put you down in order to make himself feel better  
5 and I just think how insecure must you be to stoop to that level (..) but

6                               because of that she wasn't feeling very confident at all but she didn't  
7                               come                               across                               that                               way

Too much confidence then can be seen as arrogance (line 3), which is not only bad in itself, but is also construed as a sign of insecurity (line 4), which in turn is also seen as negative. Confidence is thus not a simple thing to display, as if it is done wrong it can be interpreted as 'arrogance', which may be construed as a sign of insecurity, which is practically the opposite of confidence. Although the participant is talking about a guy here, not a young woman, the reasoning and psychologising language used, which turns 'confidence' into 'insecurity', shows the availability of such discursive resources and how they may be taken up.

The danger of coming across as arrogant and having to manage how to put oneself across is also illustrated in this extract, which is from Lakmini W's vlog "Too much self deprecation!":

**Extract 15**, later part of vlogger 5, Lakmini W vlog "too much self deprecation!"

1                               but one thing I struggled with slightly having been working on this  
2                               not for a long time but just I guess for a few months is that if I'm not  
3                               self-deprecating I just had to either not say anything or just say that I  
4                               was okay at the thing or did well in something (.) and just say it  
5                               sincerely as well which sounds so bizarre (.) that didn't feel natural to  
6                               me but it didn't feel natural like it (...) it still feels slightly strange to  
7                               do it and I'm still always aware that people may think that I'm  
8                               arrogant for doing that and they probably don't think that it's just  
9                               again coming from that environment I guess in school or wherever

10                    amongst my friends or whatever where I perhaps also thought that if  
11                    people weren't self-deprecating that they were being a little bit  
12                    arrogant (inaudible) but they weren't they were just stating how things  
13                    were (.) obviously you don't necessarily need to hear everything good  
14                    about you but it's okay to say that you're not rubbish at something but  
15                    you're good at something if you're good at that thing (.) and it's just  
16                    getting past that which is not a huge challenge but definitely doable so  
17                    then I can be more honest and do things just like this that scare me

In this extract, the speaker talks about 'struggling' and having been 'working on' not self-deprecating (line 1). Previously in the vlog, she described self-deprecating as a culture that is 'slightly unhealthy and has an effect on you'. However, here she describes it as a struggle and something she has needed to work on, to not speak of herself that way, as she is 'always aware that people may think that I'm arrogant' (line 6).

The above three extracts illustrate a pattern of women drawing on discursive resources of confidence being desirable in young women. However, the way these participants use this resource, it is important that confidence should be done correctly. It should not slip into 'cocky' but likewise, if it is done wrongly, it may be construed by others as a lack of confidence. Not only should people have the right amount, but it should also come across as 'genuine', that is, not as a sign of insecurity. Furthermore, when Lakmini W talks about it feeling strange to say she is good at something, this shows a moment of tension, when she is aware of expectations that the ideal young woman does not brag, but should not undermine herself either. And again, doing a vlog reflecting on such issues shows the normality of reflecting on the self, and managing the self, as being part of how to go about being a young woman today.

### 7.2.2. Ideal young women aim mainly for careers

When considering the ideal young woman as someone who achieves highly, takes care of her own mental health, manages and controls the self very carefully, it becomes interesting to consider what this management of the self is said to be for. What is the advantage of becoming the ideal young woman?

As shown in Extract 16, one interview participant talked about the normative expectations of others in quite scathing terms, but when asked what else she would want, she ended up back talking about establishing her career, in spite of this having been one of the expectations of others that she had been dismissive of. I will look more closely at expectations for the future in Chapter 8, but the focus on career as the main concern was very common across the dataset. In this extract the participant had been talking about being at a point in life where many people expect to find partners and have children.

**Extract 16**, Interview Participant 5, 1.st interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 5: my mother was making hints the other day Oh you have almost  
2 finished your degree (.) next step is marriage and I was like next step  
3 is university again or my career (...) but you get that from family and  
4 it's because of this whole thing of one because society has done it so  
5 early before and it's this thing of the steps of life are you are born (.)  
6 you go to school up until the age of twenty twenty-three (...) if you  
7 want you further it (.) you get masters or you get a job or a career (...)  
8 and then once you've got that you get the family you get the house  
9 you get the car (.) get the kids (..) and that's it (...) and then the tenth  
10 step is you die (...) ten steps of life (.)that's it (...) there is nothing in  
11 those ten steps that is acquire self-happiness (...) self-accomplishment  
12 is hitting targets (.) ticking the boxes' but who is happy okay (..) so



- 13                   you get happiness but mainly it's to please those around you (...)
- 14                   because once you've done all of those things(.) it's oh yeah, that's my
- 15                   daughter she's a great child (..) she did everything the right way (.)
- 16                   she's done it (..) happy
- 17    MP:            So what would you want
- 18    Participant 5: What would I want
- 19    MP:            Yeah (..)what else outside (...)
- 20    Participant 5: outside the family or (...)
- 21    MP:            Yeah I just mean outside ticking the boxes
- 22    Participant 5: so outside of that (..) what I would want is to establish my career (.)
- 23                   write a book (..) and my main thing at the moment (..) what I am
- 24                   currently working on (..) is to change the mindsets of the ages of girls
- 25                   from                    nine                    to                    twenty-five

It is quite notable that at first, she was not clear what I meant by the question (Lines 15-18). Then, when she went on to talk about what she would want outside 'ticking the boxes', the answer contains hesitations, before she continues by talking about her career (line 19) and moving on to mindsets (line 21). Given that the question was asked in response to her critiquing the 'box ticking' expectations of others (line 10), and the expected focus on a career after university, it stands out that her answer also focused on career. Planning careers appears here to be something the speaker can draw on to position herself as different to people who just 'tick boxes', which in the context of her having talked about her mother having mentioned marriage as an expected next step can be used by the speaker to position herself as different. Here, talk about wanting to establish a career works to position the speaker as more aspirational than ticking boxes, although it does not address the critique raised against the ten steps involved in ticking

the boxes that they do not include ‘acquire self-happiness’ (line 9). By returning to talking about career, it appears the speaker did not have discursive resources readily available to suggest alternatives that might lead to happiness. Although she does go on to say that she is working on a book to ‘change the mindsets of girls from nine to twenty-five’ (line 21), when elaborating on this a little later on, she said that this work also involved encouraging girls to think about careers, rather than be in a rush to be sexy and sexual. While the ideal young woman reflects on herself and critiques the idea of meeting other people’s expectations, it is evidently difficult to think of something outside those expectations.

The significance of careers, and being seen as someone who takes her future career very seriously, also came across when another participant presented a part-time job in a shoe shop, taken on out of financial necessity, as a career building opportunity:

**Extract 17**, Interview Participant 6, 1.st interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 6: in my interview I was asked about my degree a lot and if it relates at  
2 all (.) which it does because everything in terms of selling is applied  
3 social psychology
- 4 MP: Did you say that in your interview?
- 5 Participant 6: Yes I did
- 6 MP: What did they say to that
- 7 Participant 6: He was just really impressed because I was talking about my degree  
8 and I managed to link it all back to the job because I called my mum  
9 the night before and I was like mum I’ve got an interview tomorrow  
10 what do I do (..) I found out the day before that I had an interview and  
11 so my mum just said try and link everything back to the job so I think  
12 that helped

13 MP: So you weren't worried about being over qualified (..)they don't mind  
14 that

15 Participant 6: not really because I think they knew I wanted to do it alongside my  
16 degree but to be perfectly honest I'm wondering to what extent (..) I  
17 think I mentioned that a lot of psychology graduates end up going into  
18 companies and we get told that a lot of companies want good  
19 psychology graduates because of the statistics and dealing with people  
20 (..) apparently a lot of psychologists go into HR (..) I wonder to what  
21 extent the thinking is if I show some loyalty to the company like now I  
22 could work my way up and get a good degree because my manager is  
23 really flexible

The speaker here takes up a position as a responsible person who sees opportunity, and indeed opportunity in terms of future career, in what could conceivably alternatively have been presented as an undesirable necessity, an obstacle to being a high achieving student.

As will be discussed further in Chapter 8, the discursive resources about life goals or ambitions readily available to young women mostly pertain to aspirations of career, marriage, house and children. Here, it appears that presenting oneself as taking career very seriously allows a woman to position herself as ‘the right sort’ of young woman. It is possible that current rhetoric around ‘skivers and strivers’ (see e.g. Higginson, 2012; Williams, 2013) and other talk, not least by politicians and some media, describing unemployed people as lazy and morally inferior, has affected the discourses available to young women to talk about themselves. It is notable that no one described themselves in terms of being adventurous, happy-go-lucky or just not having any particular career aspirations. It is also worth bearing in mind that the women interviewed described themselves as either working- or middle-class and all attended university. The emphasis on talking about themselves in terms that made them come across as taking responsibility for planning their own futures in career aspirational ways, may be a reflection of the intersection of university attendance and class position and how aspirations are talked about among working and middle-class university undergraduates.

### **7.2.3. Control the controlling**

I will now return to the vlog discussed in Section 1.3, Extracts 6-11. Given their length I shall not reproduce it here, but the focus now is on the vlogger’s talk about the negative impact of ‘being mean to herself’ and ‘not giving herself enough credit’. Alongside the work done by the vlogger to present a self that continually works on the self, it comes across very strongly that this self-control should also be carefully controlled, as too much focus on self-improvement is unhealthy and therefore bad for the self.

In this vlog, it is presented as ‘good’ or healthy to want to improve oneself, but only to a certain extent, as too much focus on self-improvement is bad for a person’s mental health. The ‘right kind of person’ wants to self-improve, but is not overly critical of herself. Thus, the control of the self has to be controlled.

As she justifies her current state, and talks the viewer through the reasons for her thoughts, she may be seen as practicing control over the controlling of herself. As self-improvements and self-liking are both presented as desirable and what ideal selves do, self-improvement, which is itself a form of control of the self, has to be tightly controlled, as the mental health of the self may suffer otherwise, and ideal selves take responsibility for, and control of, their mental well-being. It becomes difficult to see how the right balance of continual self-improvement and self-liking can be found. The vlogger can be seen as doing young womanhood by reflecting on her own reflections on the self. Evidently, one way of performing intelligible young womanhood today involves reflecting on self-improvements and controlling the self, while carefully controlling this control and reflecting on it.

As discussed in Chapter 1, McRobbie has argued that young women are expected to be successful, but not so successful that they become a threat to men; success has to be limited. Rose (1996) has written extensively on how subjects in advanced liberal democracies are expected to work on their selves and their mental well-being, as discussed in Chapter 3. These data suggest that young women work on themselves extensively and do so partly by moderating themselves by drawing limits around, for example, how confident they should be, what they can aspire to, and how to balance self-deprecation and self-improvement. Furthermore, while these limitations may be seen as young women keeping a tight control of themselves, the women also pronounce on how the control itself should be controlled.

### 7.3 Conclusion

McRobbie's (2009) argument that women are called upon to become successful but not too successful is mainly in relation to men, and ensuring women do not threaten men's positions by becoming too successful (in traditionally male areas). These data suggest two things in addition to her argument. Firstly, the limitations on women, which they are expected to impose on themselves, go beyond limiting career or educational successes to not exceed men. The limitations apply much more widely than in career terms; for example, they also apply to how confident women should be.

Arguably, this is a vaguer formulation of expectations placed on women that may work more insidiously than any overt pronouncement that women should limit their career ambitions to not out-do men. While any direct call upon women to limit ambitions goes against the discourses of equality also readily culturally available (as for example seen in Extract 3 where the participant talks about believing in oneself), the less explicit construction of 'good' women as not too loud or over confident does the same work, but without being as easily challengeable. Secondly, while women are called upon to keep themselves in check, to not be 'too much', this controlling should also be controlled. While the self should be controlled to not be too much, the control likewise should not be too much.

The ideals for young womanhood constructed in the talk analysed here represent an ideal young woman as someone who continually works on herself; works to improve herself and keeps monitoring this work. The self is conceptualised as life-long project involving a self working on herself, and continually monitoring this work and reflecting on it.

One potential danger of overdoing the controlling of the self is being too harsh on the self. Ideal young women like themselves, they are in fact entitled to like themselves, but such liking is not always easily achieved. The self-liking is constructed as located inside a woman's head as a state of mind, and the projects of self-improving and self-liking may create trouble when trying to reconcile both.

## Chapter 8 Responsible Planning

Chapter 6 looked into young women's talk about their bodies and Chapter 7 explored the qualities of ideal young women. This chapter explores young women's talk about planning their futures and what kinds of futures are constructed in this talk.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Henderson et al.'s (2007) argument that youth is perceived at the moment as stuck in an extended adolescence, unable to achieve full adulthood and adult responsibilities. Cote and Bynner argued that society now provides fewer agreed-upon rules and "a lower consensus regarding appropriate behaviour" which, in their view, means young adults navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood must make up the void in meaning through the individualisation process, for example by taking responsibility for their own actions and decisions.

Writers such as Arnett (cited in Cote and Bynner, 2008) and Cote and Bynner (2008) discuss young adulthood as a time when young adults today are not yet adults, in the sense that they do not have the traditional markers of adulthood such as financial independence, careers, marriages or children, while Arnett further conceptualises young adulthood as a time free from adult responsibilities due to the absence of these markers. However, as also discussed in Chapter 2, Henderson et. al. (2007) argue that there is no simple destination of adulthood in late modernity. Rather adulthood has to be invented through the telling and ordering of narratives of the self, which people do by drawing on narrative repertoires reflecting their cultural and social resources, or in the terms used here, their discursive resources.



In analysing these young women's talk about the future and their present planning for these futures, two dominant narratives emerged. The first concerns 'financial responsibility' while the second, the dominant 'coupledom' narrative, identified by Reynolds and Taylor (2005), also emerged very strongly in these young women's talk. While other positionings and identity work were also being accomplished in talk about the future, this was most often done in relation to one or both of these dominant narratives.

In Section 8.1, I look at 'planning responsibility'. This includes, in Section 1.1, analysis of talk about responsible planning for adult futures starting early. Section 8.1.2 looks into the centrality of planning careers and financial self-sufficiency in the women's talk.

In Section 8.2, I take a closer look at the other narrative dominating the women's talk about the future, the dominant coupledom narrative, which formed a part of the women's constructions of the right kind of adult woman they were planning on becoming, which involved motherhood, Section 8.2.1, and husbands, Section 8.2.2, as well as careers. In the last section, I take a closer look at 'trouble' in some women's talk when they talked about wanting things in the future that were outside the normative path of well-paying careers and coupledom, but struggled to formulate what else there might be to want.

While there may have been times when financial independence, partners and children were usual at the age of 18-23, these participants were not talking as if these things were to be expected yet. However, this age, for students at least, was talked about as a time to plan how to get to a point of financial independence. Likewise, they talked about husbands and children as something they expected to have as adults, while 'now' was talked about as a time for planning when, how and in what order to have careers,

marriage and children. While they thus did not have the ‘markers’ of adulthood, they very much took on responsibility for getting them. In these women’s talk, adulthood was talked about as an endpoint, and one for which they should be planning now. When asked whether they thought of themselves as adults, none of the interview participants spoke of themselves that way, and referred to the fact that they are not financially independent as explanation for why they are not yet adults.

## **8.1 Planning Responsibility**

### **8.1.1 Early Planning**

When some writers describe young adulthood today as an extended adolescence, this can be interpreted as either an inability to move on to actually having the careers, mortgages, marriages and children associated with adulthood, usually due to the financial inability to take on these responsibilities, or as an extended time for experimenting while not having responsibilities (or a combination of the two). However, almost none of the interview participants talked about their lives now and their plans for the future in terms of exploring, or gave the impression that adult responsibilities were not their concern. Across the interviews and many vlogs, the women spoke of future hopes and plans in terms of gaining financial independence as an immediate concern, and one they were taking responsibility for now.

Across the participants talk, there was a pattern of talking about the pressures to decide on careers starting too early. This is illustrated in Extract 1, which is part of a longer account by the participant of what brought her to that university:

**Extract 1** participant 3, 1.st interview, campus:

1 Participant 3: Like I would have liked to have done drama here but I don't know how  
2 my parents would have reacted to me doing drama I think they (..) I did English  
3 because I like it and I love English and American literature but sometimes I hear my  
4 friends who I've met at drama and I think oh I wish I'd done English drama I wish I'd  
5 done that

6 MP: So what's wrong with drama

7 Participant 3: I don't know

8 MP: Not academic enough

9 Participant 3: I just (.) I'm here it's very academic it's very tough here you've got to  
10 audition to get onto the course it's very very difficult but I kind of felt like my parents  
11 would be a little bit like what job are you going to gain out of drama

12 MP: Yeah

13 Participant 3: I thought that English was like a safer bet

14 MP: Yeah

15 Participant 3: Like not just just for in the future in general like I just kind of I was  
16 really worried about going to an employer being like oh I studied drama for three  
17 years and then just thinking I spent three years dicking about in black leggings

18 MP: Yeah

19 Participant 3: So it's kind of that (.) and then ironically I've got to university and  
20 realised it doesn't matter what degree you've got as long as you've a degree (.) so it's  
21 kind of really strange (.) I think there's too much pressure put on you when you're  
22 like 16 to decide what you're going to do as a degree and it's very much like unless  
23 you're doing medicine or law it doesn't really matter what you do

24 MP: So what

25 Participant 3: Unless like I'd like unless you're kind of doing like yeah so my  
26 housemate was going to do medicine and changed and did maths on a whim and like  
27 she's like I'm so much happier because then now I've got maths I don't have to decide  
28 I'm going to be a doctor at 18

When this participant says “I think there’s too much pressure put on you when you’re like 16 to decide what you’re going to do as a degree” (lines 23-24), this forms part of an argument that it is inappropriate to make decisions regarding future career paths at 16, as this is too early. This talk constructs asking young people to decide too soon what will be the right paths for their adult selves as a problem for young people in general.

When the participant says “my housemate was going to do medicine and changed and did maths on a whim”, (lines 28-29) , emphasizing that this change made her housemate happier, by saying “and like she’s like I’m so much happier”(line 30), she explains this happiness in terms of the friend no longer having to decide on a particular career at 18, by saying “because then now I’ve got maths I don’t have to decide I’m going to be a doctor at 18” (lines 30-31). Deciding on a career at this age was constructed as causing unhappiness. The reason for the housemate now being happier was given as her no longer being tied to the given career as a doctor. In this talk it is not a particular liking for maths or dislike of medicine that caused the housemate to be happier after the change. Rather, the increased happiness is explained as her not being locked into a particular career at too young an age.

Furthermore, in this extract the participant positions herself as someone who chose responsibly but could, or maybe even should, have been under less pressure to do so.

When in lines 1-2 she says “I would have liked to have done drama here but I don’t know how my parents would have reacted to me doing drama” and in line 14 “I thought that English was like a safer bet”, followed by a realisation after getting to university that “it doesn’t matter what degree you’ve got as long as you’ve a degree” (line 22), she not only suggests that choosing degree courses too soon is a problem, but also locates the problem with external pressures, in this case her parents. She furthermore constructs doing any degree course as responsible enough, whereby being responsible is still a value adhered to in her talk, even as she critiques external pressures to choose any particular course too soon.

This participant can, in this extract, be seen to draw on a narrative of young adulthood as a time where young people should be free from responsibilities related to adulthood, but she does so in a carefully negotiated way that simultaneously lets her position herself as responsible; the speaker is not saying it does not or should not matter what young adults do, she specifies that as long as they get a degree (line 22) it does not matter which degree they do. While she takes up a subject position as critical of the pressures put on young people, she does this from a position of someone who has chosen responsibly. This extract can be seen as incorporating elements of a narrative of youth as a time of freedom, but carefully intertwining it with discursive constructions of young adulthood as a time to start planning responsibly.

### **8.1.2 Planning financial self-sufficiency**

When I asked participants whether they thought of themselves as adults, most referred to ways in which they thought of themselves as more adult than they had been, but most also referred to a lack of financial independence as reasons for not being adult, as illustrated in the next extract:

**Extract 2, Participant 3, 2.nd interview, Skype:**

- 1 Participant 3: I felt quite adult when, you know, there's a problem with the house I  
2 either managed to fix it on my own or call the appropriate parties without having to  
3 involve my parents going this is broken what do I do (inaudible) but by the same token  
4 I'm not financially independent yet

In this extract, the participant constructs adulthood as a process, whereby people may reach some elements of adulthood but may remain non-adult in other respects, echoing Thomson et al.'s argument discussed in Chapter 2. In Lines 3-4, when she says "but by the same token I'm not financially independent yet", it is clear that she is drawing on a discourse of full adulthood as involving financial independence. Including the word "yet" (line 4), suggests an expectation that this stage of adulthood will follow, at some point.

Participants can be seen as drawing on a narrative of progression to adulthood that is in agreement with the version of 'extended adolescence', discussed in Chapter 2, that focuses on financial independence. However, while the young women in this study did not have financial independence, in their talk about their futures they often talked about themselves as expecting to become financially self-sufficient, and most had some plan for how to achieve this. They can thus not be considered to be in an extended adolescence in the sense of not having a sense of personal responsibility. This sense of responsibility is expressed quite clearly in the next two extracts.

**Extract 3, participant 6, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview, Skype:**

1 MP: What would you say is the biggest issue for you right now in your life  
2 Participant 6: Probably thinking about beyond uni (.) thinking about where I'm going  
3 to be (.) we are constantly being reminded that we're past the halfway point now and  
4 it's like it's kind of scary to think I'm not even 20 yet and I'm having to think about  
5 my career really seriously and what the next options are (.) I'm looking into (..) I want  
6 to be a therapist a behaviour therapist so I'm looking into postgraduate options for that  
7 (.) I suppose that's probably the biggest issue because it's kind of the scariest (.) but  
8 there are little things that keep cropping up as well that I just deal with on a daily basis  
9 but that's probably the overarching one that I'm just (.) I don't want to move back  
10 home but I'm probably going to have to because of finances and I don't know (..) I've  
11 got my job in a shoe shop but I don't want to do that full time (.) things like that

In this extract, the participant clearly states that the biggest issue in her life at the moment is planning the future: "thinking about beyond uni (.) thinking about where I'm going to be" (Line 2). This issue is talked about in a way that positions the speaker as responsible. When she says "I'm having to think about my career really seriously and what the next options are (.) I'm looking into (..) I want to be a therapist a behaviour therapist so I'm looking into postgraduate options for that" (lines 4-7), she is demonstrating responsibility by having started to plan ahead.

Although one participant differed from the pattern of talking about having a plan, she still spoke of the importance of caring about pay later:

**Extract 4**, participant 3, 1.st interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 3: Erm (..) and it's kind of weird that I just there was just a lot on pressure  
2 on you when you were younger to have it all figured out at the time when you're still  
3 really worried that you've acne and your teeth aren't straight
- 4 MP: Yeah
- 5 Participant 3: It's kind of I find that really bizarre.
- 6 MP: Do you think there's pressure to be successful
- 7 Participant 3: Yeah (.) definitely (.) people are like what job are you going to do and  
8 you say this and I say oh I want to work in comedy management (.) alright and how  
9 well does that pay (.) I don't know
- 10 MP: Okay
- 11 Participant 3: I want to do it because I enjoy it I don't care how much it pays (.) I will  
12 care how much it pays when I'm older and I've got a mortgage not but right now

When the participants says “I will care how much it pays when I’m older and I’ve got a mortgage” (lines 11-12), she is drawing on a narrative of ‘older’ people as people who care about pay and mortgages. Drawing on this discursive construction of older people simultaneously makes available a subject position for her as a young person who, according to this construction, need not care about pay and mortgages yet. When she says “people are like what job are you going to do and you say this and I say oh I want to work in comedy management (.) alright and how well does that pay (.) I don't know” (lines 7-9), she is drawing on a discourse of youth as a time when such concerns should not matter. However, saying “I say oh I want to work in comedy management” (line 8), guards against any potential accusation that she is not a responsible person, by demonstrating that she does have an occupation in mind. This responsibility is backed



up as she includes as taken-for-granted that she will care about pay, and get a mortgage, later (line 12).

There was a very strong pattern across the data set of a common-sense understanding that young women are altogether responsible for themselves financially and career wise. Even as some do not express optimism that this will happen easily or soon, like when Participant 6 in Extract 3, lines 10-11 says “I don’t want to move back home but I’m probably going to have to because of finances”, they almost all talk as if it is a common-sense truth that this is their duty. Evidently, this idea has become a commonly available discourse about young people that the women draw on in their talk about themselves, at least in so far as the interview participants positioned themselves as responsible people in the context of the interviews. However, there was simultaneously a pattern of participants drawing on discourses that this responsibility is too early (as discussed in Section 8.1.1), and not what youth should be.

When Participant 6 in Extract 3, line 4-5 says “I’m not even 20 yet and I’m having to think about my career really seriously”, and Participant 3, Extract 4, line 5, says “I find that really bizarre” (in relation to having to have it all figured out), these are subtle hints that participants are drawing on discourses of youth as something else, something other than having to think seriously about career before the age of 20. It is possible that, in spite of these young women embracing the idea of such personal responsibility at this age, discourses of young adulthood as a time of freedom and possibly exploration, as suggested by writers such as Arnett, or even as a time of moratorium as suggested by Erik Erikson (e.g. 1968, cited in Miell, Phoenix and Thomas, 2002) remain present, even if they are now drawn on only vaguely to highlight how bizarre or scary responsibility at this age is.

There was a strong sense in the data set that these young women find the responsibilities almost too much too soon. Participant 6's comment "I'm not even 20 yet" is interesting in light of the 'individualisation thesis' (Beck, 1994, cited in Lawler, 2008. P.34) argument that people in late modernity have to forge their biographies themselves, where people in more traditional societies would not have been called upon to do this, as it would not have been unusual to have been considered adult at the age of twenty. The comment 'not even 20' in relation to the decisions, plans and choices the speaker has to make, especially as she describes this as "scary", only makes sense in a context of not only extended choices but also extended adolescence where twenty can be seen as early to make 'adult' career decisions. These participants make it quite clear that young adulthood today, in a context of taking personal responsibility for their own life trajectories, can be seen as both scary and bizarre. In other words, choices and young adulthood as an extended time of choosing and planning their choices is not unambiguously positive. Indeed, responsibility for choosing responsibly is talked about in rather negative terms.

When participants drew on discourses of adulthood that focused on financial independence, it was mostly left unspoken what and whom they would be independent from. As there was no talk of people, families, communities or state benefits which they might rely on (except for one participant as I will discuss later in this section), or what the alternative to financial independence would be, it seems that their talk assumed they will not rely on anyone else.

The pattern across the dataset was to talk about adulthood and independence in terms of financial independence and having a sufficient income before planning marriage and children. The next extract illustrates this pattern:

**Extract 5**, participant 6, 2.nd interview, Skype:

1 Participant 6: It's not so much the idea of getting married, it sounds really stupid, it's  
2 not so much the idea of getting married but the thought of spending my life with  
3 [boyfriend's name] is really exciting (.) we've talked about it a bit and if (.) because  
4 next year we're living together it's just the two of us in a flat (.) we've got a flat it's  
5 gorgeous and it's really cute and it's the perfect location and we are living together  
6 next year (.) this year we're together but not financially interdependent next year we  
7 are going to be depending on one another financially to an extent because we are  
8 paying bills together and we're going to see how that goes and then think about (.)

9 MP: Is it just going to be the two of you next year (.) ah

10 Participant 6: we want to see how it goes but we're also thinking if we were to get  
11 engaged soon(.) I wouldn't want to get engaged until after I've graduated but if we  
12 were to get engaged soon then we'd have a long engagement so we could save up  
13 decide what we wanted and maybe get a property but have a long period of time to  
14 save up work out what we want but have the promise that we're going to get married  
15 being there (.) if we were to wait until we'd got a house we'd got jobs then we'd have  
16 a shorter engagement (..) that's the thinking (..) I know that sounds a bit soon

While planning marriage in earlier times may have been seen as the opposite of planning financial independence, when the young women in this study spoke of marriage, it was usually spoken of as following financial independence, not a source of financial dependence. When this participants says "next year we are going to be depending on one another financially to an extent because we are paying bills together and we're going to see how that goes" (Lines 7-8), she is not talking about becoming financially dependent on her boyfriend, but about seeing how it goes when they are both financially responsible. She then goes on to talk about considerations for when to get engaged or married. When she says "if we were to get engaged soon then we'd have a long engagement so we could save up decide what we wanted and maybe get a

property” (Lines 12-14), she is not only taking up a position as a responsible person, by not planning marriage before they have saved up enough money, but also drawing on a narrative common across the interviews, of a proper sequence of progression whereby financial independence, via careers, comes first, then marriage, followed by children.

### **8.1.3 Planning Independence**

The narratives of future careers, husbands and children, were talked about by the participants in terms of earning enough money to support themselves and children. Any other type of support was not touched upon. While left unspoken, there seemed to be an assumption that needs for support are only financial, as any mention of other adults in their future plans was restricted to husbands. Needs were not mentioned in terms of friendships or any other kind of support. There was no talk of wider communities, input from parents or anyone else, giving an impression of imagined future lives that are restricted to work, while outside work only husbands and children feature. This is not to say participants did not imagine anything else existing in their futures, but it is noteworthy that these were the features of life participants brought up when talking about their futures, indicating that when speaking about the as yet unknown future, these were the factors they chose to talk about, and in doing so positioned themselves as responsible young women. While I can of course not analyse things they did not say, it is worth noting that when asked about their futures, this elicited talk in which the speakers positioned themselves as responsible young women in relation to finance, careers and marriage, in that order, and not, for example, fun and frivolity.

One person stood out from the pattern of talking about life as a trajectory involving leaving family of origin to focus narrowly on career, husband and children:

**Extract 6**, participant 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> interview, café:

- 1 MP: So where do you think you'll be in five years' time

- 2 Participant 4: Ah... I don't know (..) but I like to think that I'm like back at home  
3 helping my family the family that I already have rather than a family I need to build  
4 (..) yeah (.) I don't know (.) maybe I'll see whether I can do a master or something to  
5 compensate for the time when I don't think I did my degree well enough (..)
- 6 MP: mmm
- 7 Participant 4: That kind of thing (.) erm (...) I probably like see myself in a  
8 relationship with someone (.) I don't yeah I'm actually trying to date people and stuff  
9 like that (.)
- 10 MP: Yeah
- 11 Participant 4: I think I would try dating people (..) erm (..) I probably would be in a  
12 job (.) I probably actually wouldn't be with my family I think I would be living by  
13 myself type have like some pets [Laughter]

In saying "I like to think that I'm like back at home helping my family the family that I already have rather than a family I need to build" (lines 2-3), this participant's talk was unusual in that she considered her family of origin as a possible destination at all (even if she also mentioned other options). Furthermore, this talk was unusual in the way she talked about helping them (line 2-3). All the other participants spoke about families of origin in terms only of parents, and mentioned parents in terms of people whom they themselves had been relying on and been dependent on, and from whom they now planned to become independent. Viewing families in broader terms than parents, and particularly viewing them as people the woman herself might return to help, was only seen in the talk of this participant.

For all other participants, there was an assumption that they would live away from their parents after university. The only factor that might stop this was their own lack of

money (like Participant 6 in Extract 3 above). They thus all, except one, spoke of living away from parents as a natural, or expected progression, giving a clear impression that ideal young women are independent of parents and wider families or communities of origin. The only thing that could trouble such a progression would be money. No one mentioned any other way in which they might need other people, and no one mentioned that the expected progression might not be possible for everyone. Although there was concern about how soon they could become financially independent of their parents, all the participants spoke as if this would be achieved at some point.

When Participant 2, in Extract 6, goes on to say “I probably actually wouldn’t be with my family I think I would be living by myself type” (lines 13-14), she too can be seen to be drawing on the narrative of progression to independence, although she does this in a different way to the narrative of independence, in the above mentioned sequence of career, marriage then children.

The narrative of moving from dependence on parents as a child, to independence as an adult was drawn on, even as the participant drew on other narratives of family as mutual support unit. When this participant draws on the increasing independence narrative, it enables her to take up a subject position as ‘the kind of person who lives on her own with some pets’. Arguably this is a known trope; she includes the word “type” in the sentence “I think I would be living by myself type have like some pets” (lines 13-14). This can be seen as an even more independent position than the one constructed by the more common narrative of increasing independence where the young adult, while independent of parents, has formed a new family unit with a man. When the participant who deviated from that narrative does draw on a narrative of increasing independence, it is a different version of independence than the one constructed in the more common narrative. When the participant does make use of such an increasing independence narrative, she does it in a way that produces a different subject. The ‘unattached woman

with pets' is arguably a familiar character who is very different to the married heterosexual woman with children.

This way of drawing on an increasing independence narrative can be seen to provide a possibility of positioning herself as non-normative, even as the dominant narrative of increasing independence is drawn on. This can be seen as an example of using a well-known narrative, but bending it to open up a possibility for a different subject position or subjectivity. This newer subject is arguably even more independent than the more familiar married subject. When the increasing independence narrative was drawn on here, it was done by drawing on discourses of independent women, who not only become independent of their family of origin, but a woman who is independent of any other people.

It appears that the increasing independence narrative is dominant and usually in a form coupled with narratives of progression towards marriage. However, that version is not beyond questioning. To borrow Butler's terminology of the 'slow bending of citations' (cited in Morison and Macleod, 2013, p.570), it can be bent and merged with another discourse of independent women, producing a different kind of independence and a different kind of woman.

By slightly changing the narrative it does different work, as it enables a new subject position. The narrative now produces a subject that is independent in a different way to the independence produced by the more common use of the narrative. Notably, the independent woman brought into being in this different use of the narrative, is not a woman whose single status is a deficit. Reynolds et al (2007) discuss how currently single women's identity work is often done in relation to a common construction of singleness for women as a deficit identity. The single woman invoked in Extract 6, is clearly single by choice. When the participant draws on the repertoire of single-woman-with-pets, this is hearable as a woman who is not only single by choice, but also more

independent than women who marry men. This a use of the increasing independence narrative that is subtly changed from a normative pattern, to produce a non-normative subject.

Although the most common version of the increasing independence narrative was challenged in Extract 6, it conforms to an imperative of independence. As the independence constructed in the single-woman-with-pets version is arguably more independent than the more normative independence in the married-with-children version, the imperative is left intact as the ideal status for young adult women to achieve.

In the current context of ‘extended adolescence’ and increasing difficulties with achieving traditional markers of adulthood, this focus on independence may be setting young women up to never quite reach the independence desire, while encouraging them to hold themselves personally responsible for this. It appears, in this study, that the difficulties with achieving financial independence have not produced as shift in ideals away from narratives of independence. On the contrary, these young women were highly focused on planning for achieving this. While independence has become harder to achieve, young women's focus on its importance, planning for it and taking personal responsibility for achieving it, has continued, and may even have increased.

## **8.2 Planning to become the right kind of adult woman**

It was evident from the data that the ‘right kind’ of young woman has a plan for the future. There was some variability in when, whether and how the participants talked about getting to their end point, but they almost all spoke of a plan, which in turn usually involved careers, financial independence, and very often husband and children.



### 8.2.1 Planning motherhood

During talk about what they hoped or planned for the future, most participants mentioned that they wanted to have children. In the next extract, Participant 7 talks about that:

**Extract 7**, participant 7, 1<sup>st</sup> interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 7: Yes it was really stressful because my boyfriend [boyfriend's name]  
2 and I haven't even known him for a year but I was thinking about where to get a job  
3 and he really wants to go to America (.) I had this massive stress like well maybe I  
4 should move to America just in case he moves to America and then we don't have to  
5 break up and I have to have a career that I can quit when I'm in my 30's so I'll have  
6 time to have babies and all this nonsense (..) it's too stressful and ridiculous so I'm not  
7 considering my career based on those things any more (.) it was definitely more  
8 stressful for a couple of weeks the baby thing especially because if you get to 35 or  
9 something you've got really bad chances of having a baby
- 10 MP: So do you think you do have to quit a career
- 11 Participant 7: I would (.) I would quit until my child went to school just because (.)  
12 this might be a really horrible thing to say but I feel you can notice the difference in  
13 kids who've had a stay at home mum who's had time to play with them and show  
14 them love whenever they need it compared to kids who had a child minder (.) I don't  
15 know if that's a mean thing to say (.) probably (..)
- 16 Participant 7: I was planning to have a career like in engineering or whatever and  
17 then quit have a baby and then be a teacher because then I could (..) it is a good job but  
18 people look down on it but if I had kids then it would make sense (.) I could spend  
19 summer holidays with them and pick them up from school at the right time
- 20

This extract illustrates a common finding in the project. The interview participants plan to have children, but only after they have established a career: “I have to have a career that I can quit when I’m in my 30’s so I’ll have time to have babies and all this nonsense” (lines 5-6). However, this participant went further by also talking about the stress involved in trying to plan to have her children before she is 35: “the baby thing especially because if you get to 35 or something you’ve got really bad chances of having a baby” (lines 8-10).

The talk in this extract also illustrates a pattern of drawing on the discourse that women should take the main responsibility for children. As the participant says “I would quit until my child went to school just because (.) this might be a really horrible thing to say but I feel you can notice the difference in kids who’ve had a stay at home mum who’s had time to play with them and show them love whenever they need it compared to kids who had a child minder” (lines 12-16). Here, she is justifying having to quit her job to have children, with reference to the children’s well-being, although this is left unspecified. This comes across as a sacrifice she would have to make, indeed one mothers should make, for the sake of the children. Evidently, the discourse of mothers being the best at caring for the children remains, even though all the young women I spoke to, and all the vloggers, assumed they would have careers.

This is obviously an old and persistent narrative. What is arguably new, is the way the young women in this study also took responsibility for when they should have their children. In the next extract, the participant is likewise talking about planning children at the right time and under the right circumstances:

**Extract 8**, participant 6, 2<sup>nd</sup> interview, Skype:

- 1 MP: So if we think more long term future (.) do you think you will want to
- 2 have children

3 Participant 6: Yes that has always been something that I want and there are a couple  
4 of things I want first I want to be married have a house and a job and I know it sounds  
5 cheeky to get a job and then take time out for maternity leave but I'd like some sort of  
6 stability

7 MP: I was going to ask how that would work because (.)

8 Participant 6: I'd like to have a job and be working for a decent amount of time  
9 before I start thinking about having kids because I think it is cheeky just to set up and  
10 say by the way I'm off'

11 MP: But I think also if you don't have a job if you have children it's very  
12 difficult in the

13 Participant 6: Yes there's that as well (.) I think what I'd really like to do is focus in  
14 my 20's on establishing a career and then in my 30's I know that's a bit later but start  
15 thinking about it then

16 MP: Yes (.) have you talked with [boyfriend's name] about that

17 Participant 6: Yes he's always wanted kids as well so it's something that we're both  
18 on the same page in terms of (..)

19 MP: Okay

20 Participant 6: And he's very much like I have to have a house and a job before kids  
21 (.) so that's another reason why we work really well because we both want the same  
22 things out of life

This extract illustrates a pattern found across the data, that not only did the women talk about planning to take on most of the responsibility for future children, they also positioned themselves as responsible people by talking about planning when to have

children in terms of their own age (as in Extract 7), and in terms of where they are in their careers.

In lines 3-4, Participant 6 explains that “there are a couple of things I want first I want to be married have a house and a job”. As she goes on to elaborate that “I’d like to have a job and be working for a decent amount of time before I start thinking about having kids because I think it is cheeky just to set up and say by the way I’m off” (lines 8-10), it is noteworthy that what needs explaining here, is why she would like to have been working for a while, before having children. The sequence of 'married, house, job' is treated as self-evident: children come after those other items in the plan.

In Extracts 7 and 8, the young women can be seen to talk about decisions around having children in terms of choices they make. Where women some generations ago, or in the traditional societies discussed by Giddens (1991), may not have had much choice about whether to have children or not, young women today can be seen to consider not only whether to have children or not (although most women in this study did want them), but also when to have them. The two extracts above demonstrate a pattern found across the data set, that *when* women plan to have children is an issue the young women use in positioning themselves as responsible people. In both extracts, the timing of having children, i.e. not too soon, and not after 35, is presented as something responsible young women consider carefully rather than, for example, leave to chance, or decide much later in life. Like the careful controlling of the self discussed in the previous chapter, the future is here presented as something that responsible young women carefully plan and control.

### **8.2.2 Planning men**

In Extract 8, the participant could be seen to present herself not only as responsible in relation to children and career, but also in relation to planning children with the right man. She presents the boyfriend as equally responsible by saying he is “very much like

I have to have a house and a job before kids” (line 20), and as suited to her when she says “that’s another reason why we work really well together” (line 21) and “we both want the same things out of life” (line 21-22).

In the following extract, another participant likewise talks about relationships with men:

**Extract 9**, participant 9, 1.st interview, campus:

1 Participant 9: (..) or they meet a guy and then the guy may be the total opposite of  
2 well why do you really need to study but she may be I want to study I want to do this I  
3 want to achieve something (.) but he could be yeah but we are together focus on me  
4 (.) and I’ve had friends who their boyfriends would be like oh why are you always  
5 studying and I am if a guy says that to me I know mate there’s the door get out straight  
6 away (.) because that means you don’t believe I am worth anything that way I  
7 shouldn’t better myself

8 MP: Yeah

9 Participant 9: So if you can’t handle me in the state I am in now what happens if I  
10 better myself what would you do

11 MP: Yeah

12 Participant 9: so that’s what I want a lot of women to feel today (.) I feel that if that  
13 happened that will I don’t want to say stop but change and reduce the amount of things  
14 that happen today such as, you’ve got things like child abuse women being abused  
15 children having children (.) I say children because even as teenagers they still have  
16 [inaudible] as a child (.) bullying eating disorders health problems (.) so many other  
17 things I think will be changed if women knew their value because one (.) we would

- 18 have less numbers in those situations because they wouldn't have [inaudible] that's not  
19 right I am getting myself out (.) and will have a voice to speak for themselves

When this woman talks about boyfriends who might not be good enough, she implies that it is a personal strength of hers that she would not put up with a questionable partner. In positioning herself as a strong woman by stating how she would not put up with an undesirable man, “if a guy says that to me I know mate there's the door get out straight away” (lines 5-6), the man's qualities, or lack thereof, become a reflection of her. In this way, although she does not state this directly, being with the right sort of partner becomes the woman's responsibility. This is similar to the way McRobbie (2015) describes ‘the perfect’, where young women are responsible for having perfect husbands, as well as perfect careers, homes, and so on.

As the participant goes on to elaborate on the ‘abusive situations’ there would be fewer of if ‘women knew their value’ (“things like child abuse women being abused children having children (.) I say children because even as teenagers they still have [inaudible] as a child (.) bullying eating disorders health problems (.) so many other things I think will be changed if women knew their value”(lines 14-18)), she further puts responsibility for abuse, eating disorders, bullying and so on, onto women. While she does not say this directly, by positioning herself as different, as a woman who does know her own value, she does strongly imply that ideal women do not get abused, which puts responsibility for abusers' behaviours and eating disorders on women.

While Extract 9 was more explicit than most of the data in outlining consequences of women ‘knowing their own value’, in terms of less abuse and so on, there was a pattern across the data of women voicing claims that they would not be in a relationship with a man who was found wanting. In that sense, they were imagining future relationships that would be how they wanted them to be, as they would not have been with a man

who was less than that to begin with. This in turn puts the onus on women for making sure future spouses and co-parents will be as ideal as they expect themselves to be.

While this way of talking about partners can be seen as adding to the responsibilities of women, this way of talking is also drawing on feminist-like rhetoric. Participant 9's talk about "women knowing their value" (line 18) and the undesirability of men who do not think women are "worth anything" (line 7) is clearly drawing on discursive resources of women as inherently valuable and worthy and deserving to be treated as such by male partners (in this talk especially in relation to studying and "bettering myself" (line 9-10)). The very idea of standing up to men and throwing them out if they do not treat a woman as they ought, is itself a feminist inspired notion, and it certainly draws on discursive resources of strong, independent women.

When women talk of getting educations and careers as an unquestioned expectation, this can likewise be seen as a feminist development, even if it no longer stands out as a particularly novel feminist statement for a young woman to say she wants a career. It is, after all, not that long since it was not generally assumed that women would be university educated and have their own careers. Education and careers may no longer be groundbreaking feminist issues. However, Participant 9, who talked quite a lot about wanting young women to realize their own value, while not describing herself as a feminist directly, did so indirectly by saying that her friends described her that way.

In these young women's talk some feminist arguments can be seen as clearly present. Women are assumed to be entitled to education, careers and partners who will recognize this entitlement. In Chapter 6 there were similarly elements of feminist critique of beauty ideals in some participants' talk about body image. However, when these young women simultaneously talk about education, careers, partners and parenthood in terms of individualized responsibility, the feminist arguments they draw on as discursive resources are being used within a wider discourse of individuality, responsibility and

personal accountability that does not incorporate any structural feminist analysis. Rather, it becomes an individual obligation to live out feminist ideals in one's personal life. Chapter 7 found that young women's entitlement to well-being and to like themselves looks as if a kind of feminism is being taken into account, but it is a feminism that is highly individualised and focused on individual women's interior mental states. Similarly, there is here a danger that feminist critiques of the oppression of women on a structural level are turned into ideals that women should be seen to have overcome individually in order to be seen as successful young women. The feminist discourses of entitlement to well-being and not being abused by male partners, are here taken up and used in performing work that looks rather anti-feminist.

### 8.3 Trouble in wanting more

A few instances from the interviews stood out from the pattern across the dataset discussed in the previous sections. As well as outlining plans for future careers and families, there was also an expressed desire for something different, although the participants could be seen to struggle to formulate this:

**Extract 10**, participant 4, 1<sup>st</sup> interview, campus:

- 1 Participant 4: maybe (..) I've considered moving countries.
- 2 MP: Yeah where might you go
- 3 Participant 4: New Zealand
- 4 MP: Ah what's with the New Zealand connection (..) do you know anybody out
- 5 there
- 6 Participant 4: Well (..) my boyfriend's family's from there and it just (..) the more
- 7 and more I read about it the more I like the sound of it but I guess it's just a dream at



- 8 the moment and it would be very hard with my family living so far away (..) but I like  
9 the sound of the culture over there (..) it sounds a lot more relaxed (..)
- 10 MP: Oh right in what way (.) I don't really know (..)
- 11 Participant 4: Just the attitude of the people there (.) they're a (..) well I don't know  
12 because I've never been (..) I'm just basing it totally on what's been said I think they  
13 seem a lot more willing to help and there's a concept of whanau which means family  
14 which means you can help a brother out kind of thing (.) consider your cousins second  
15 cousin your mum's Aunt's (.) oh I don't know (.) all one big family and it's very much  
16 a culture of what can I do for you rather than what can I get out of this (..) that's totally  
17 based on what I've heard and what I've read

When in this extract, the participant has stated she is considering moving to New Zealand, because the culture is more relaxed over there (lines 9-10), she struggles to describe what is better about it: "Just the attitude of the people there (.) they're a (..) well I don't know because I've never been (..) (lines 12-13). The talk about the possibility of forging a future in New Zealand, and the vague formulation of what would be different and better there, can be seen as a way of imagining a future that is better, while the lack of detail in the explanation of what is better about it, indicates that she did not have access to discursive resources for detailing what she would want that would be different to what it would be in Britain. The closest she got to specifying was "all one big family and it's very much a culture of what can I do for you rather than what can I get out of this", (lines 16-18), which can be interpreted as a wistful wanting of something less individualistic, but again, the speaker seemed to not have access to discursive resources for formulating what it is she is wishing for, and why.

The difficulty with voicing something more, other than work and nuclear families, likewise came across quite clearly in the following extract:

**Extract 11**, participant 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> interview, café:

1 Participant 2: yeah (.) have like a routine of work and looking after myself probably  
2 normal things but nothing overly ambitious but enough to keep me feeling steady and  
3 therefore happy (.) yeah (..)

4 MP: So happy to you means being steady like is there a certain element of security  
5 in that

6 Participant 2: Yeah (..) I did think like in this world as it is I'm going to fulfil all my  
7 passions like (...) I've always like when I was younger I used to say to myself I would  
8 love to study philosophy in Paris and art history in Rome and that kind of thing

9 MP: mm

10 Participant 2: but money doesn't grow on trees so I can't [Laughter] so (...) all these  
11 ideas that I have I want to fulfil (.) I know that it probably won't happen but that's  
12 okay because I'm still luckier than most people in the world and if I'm looking after  
13 myself and paying bills on time and then have a roof over my head then I shouldn't  
14 really complain too much

15 MP: Yes (.) but it sounds a lot like you wish it was a different world and had been  
16 more (..)

17 Participant 2: Yeah (..)

18 MP: So what would you like to be different

19 Participant 2: [Laughter] (...) yeah (..) I don't like things to (.) I don't understand  
20 what I mean (.) I (...) like everything isn't about money you have to pay for water you  
21 have to pay to live somewhere (.)

Again, like Participant 4, this participant talks about wanting something different, or more, than financial stability. When she says “I’ve always like when I was younger I used to say to myself I would love to study philosophy in Paris and art history in Rome and that kind of thing” (lines 6-9) and “but money doesn’t grow on trees so I can’t [Laughter] so (...) all these ideas that I have I want to fulfil” (lines 11-12), she is very clearly taking up a position as a kind of person who wants more than just the financial stability she had just spoken about in lines 1-2 (having “like a routine of work and looking after myself probably normal things but nothing overly ambitious”). However, she struggles to elaborate on what this would be. When she says “I don’t understand what I mean’ (Lines 20-21), this suggests that although she is clear she wants something more, she does not have available to her discursive resources for formulating what this would be.

## **8.4 Conclusion**

The young women in this study gave a very clear impression that they know what is expected of them, (even though there was some variability in how easily they thought they would succeed and when they thought they should get there). They also shared an idea of what responsible adult womanhood looks like. These young women could be seen to talk about their future lives in terms of taking personal responsibility for forging their own biographies.

The talk focused on financial independence as the primary obligation of this responsibility. While it was rarely questioned that they were responsible for their life courses, the foremost factor in this future life was to be self-reliant in terms of financial needs. Additionally, the biographies for which they take responsibility focus on careers and nuclear families.

When Giddens (1991) talks about forging personal biographies through making choices (that people in traditional societies were supposedly not required to make) it appears that young women today have taken on board the idea that they do shape their future lives through their own choices, and the biographies they view themselves as responsible for shaping are very similar.

Even where the planned future occupations may vary somewhat, they are almost all imagined as sufficiently well paid to allow financial independence. Furthermore, these young women also imagined themselves as forming heteronormative families in which they would take on the main responsibility for childcare. In addition, it was their responsibility to make sure the man they have children with is a 'good' one. Not only do these biographies look remarkably similar, raising a question of how much choice is involved when the only choices indicated lead to fairly identical biographies, it also seems that the young women have taken on the idea that women can have careers, houses, husbands and children. They talk about having all this in terms of doable and desirable futures that they are responsible for shaping.

Having good careers, financial independence, good husbands and children seems to have gone from being seen as something desirable for some, to a personal obligation. However, there were some instances of talk indicating that the imagined future lives would not be quite perfect. When participants spoke of lack of money not allowing them to do what they wanted, or having to quit work for children, it seems young women are not all expecting, or taking responsibility for creating, what McRobbie termed 'the Perfect' (2015).

In her 'Notes on the Perfect', McRobbie argues that what makes 'the perfect' different to the idea of 'having it all', meaning having good careers, husbands, children and beautiful homes, is the incessant self-control and self-regulation involved in 'the perfect'. She argues that these constant calculations and controlling of the self seem to

put women in control of their own lives, but rather than being a popular female fantasy, the perfect is “instead a kind of neoliberal spreadsheet, a constant benchmarking of the self, a highly standardised mode of self-assessment, a calculation of one’s assets, a fear of possible losses” (p. 10). The participants in this research can be seen to be pursuing such notions of having perfect careers, husbands and children, while also taking complete responsibility for controlling themselves and their lives. However, there were tensions in some women’s talk, indicating that they did not at all times view their futures as if perfection was obtainable. For example, one participant assumed she would have to change career when she became a mother and several participants spoke of wanting something more, or something different in life, outside the normative path of careers and domestic life, even as they struggled to formulate what this would be. While it thus seems that young women to a great extent do self-regulate, self-control and take responsibility for most aspects of their lives and plan to follow rather normative paths of traditional motherhood, marriage and good careers, there are also ruptures in this construction of young womanhood, as some young women question whether it is enough.

However, as talk about their futures mostly focused on husbands, children and work, the scope of future lives, whether imagined as perfect or not, seems very narrow. Young women can be seen to be very limited in the futures they can imagine, as if the discursive resources they have available do not provide them with many other ideas than financial stability and nuclear families, even while they are similarly positioning themselves positively by talking about themselves as if they were unique. It thus seems that young women are practically required to conform in order to present themselves as acceptably responsible, while equally required to present such conformity as uniquely individual.

Although these young women did not have the traditional markers of adulthood, they did have concerns and responsibilities associated with adulthood. They did not have children, careers, marriages or mortgages but they spoke very much in terms of having responsibility not only for getting them, but also for doing it all at the right time and in the right order. Thus, while young womanhood today may not include ‘traditional’ markers of adulthood for many, the age 18-23 cannot be seen as an extended time of freedom from adult concerns. ‘Extended adolescence’ is only an appropriate concept to use about this age group in so far as the concept is used to refer to the absence of financial self-sufficiency. Although these young women do not actually have mortgages, jobs, partners and children, they are already taking responsibility for getting them. Arnett’s view of young adulthood as a time of freedom from adult responsibilities therefore looks questionable in light of the way the young women here talked about the present and their futures. While none of the interviewees and only one of the vloggers had financial independence, and none had marriage partners or children, they cannot be seen as free of concerns associated with such responsibilities that in the views of many youth scholars are associated with adulthood.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion

This thesis has presented a detailed analysis of the complexities involved in negotiating young womanhood in Britain today. I set out to investigate how young women negotiate the potentially contradictory demands facing them. These include pressures to look good in narrowly defined ways. I furthermore investigated how young women negotiate the discourses that posit that women are now empowered, and the possible related pressure not to position oneself as anything less than empowered. I was interested in whether young women orient to these pressures, and if so, how they navigate them.

A starting point for the research was the assumption, based on the literature, that post-feminist discourses of young women as now both empowered and sexy consumers and equal with men would produce new possibilities for doing contemporary femininity, but also perhaps close down some ways of performing this, for example, through what is discouraged or considered undesirable.

By analysing women's talk in interviews and talk and appearances in vlogs, the thesis has examined what possibilities are available to young women within current discursive constructions constraining and defining what is considered desirable. The analytic approach used assumes worlds and subjectivities are constituted in social practices and language. I have used the definition of discourse that includes meaning-making practices other than language, and extended existing analytical methods to enable analysis of performances in vlogs.

The thesis has presented empirical analyses of how young women orient to bodies and body-related issues in their talk and appearance. Furthermore, it has presented analyses of what emerged from the women's talk as desirable characteristics in young women, and how young women position themselves in their talk about their futures. Through the

discursive work done by the women, a construction of an ideal young female subject emerged. The empirical chapters of this thesis contribute to understandings of how young womanhood is constructed today by demonstrating how complex navigating young womanhood is.

In the following sections I summarise the contributions of this thesis. I start by summarising the methodological contribution. I then summarise my findings from the three empirical chapters. Finally, I present some closing thoughts and consider possible future directions for further research.

## **9.1 The methodological contribution**

To access some of the complexities of contemporary young womanhood, I collected semi-structured interview material and on-line videos (vlogs). I used an analytic framework enabling analysis of how young womanhood is performed in talk and video self-presentation. This thesis makes an important contribution in the method developed to analyse the audio-visual material of the vlogs. By adapting Morison and Macleod's (2013) extension of Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive analytic framework, this thesis has provided an example of how we may analyse data that include audio and visual elements.

In Chapter 4 I outlined the analytic framework that also allows analysis of material where different performances of identity and femininity may be going on simultaneously. Analysing what such performances are doing and, not least, doing together, as in the example of the vlog analysed in Chapter 6 'Body Image and Body confidence' by Vlogger 6, Hannah Witton, is one very useful way of analysing material that is as rich as vlogs. The combination of spoken word, appearance, actions and so on, allows for complex combined identity work. I have demonstrated how a discursive



analysis of vlogs that pays attention to what is being performed, and how gender norms may be reiterated or challenged, provides a way of accessing what young women vloggers do with the discursive resources that are available to them. It also provides a way of analysing gendered performances and identity work that is accomplished by drawing on resources other than speech. This could potentially be extended to audio-visual material other than vlogs.

The young women's constructions of 'ideal young women' and their qualities, was highly complex. Their talk involved drawing on existing discourses and narratives to construct new subjects. In this sense, the work being done in the talk analysed, illustrates how pre-existing meanings are picked up and used in new ways, to construct new meanings, and new subject positions for people within those meanings. Narratives can here be clearly seen as both resource and construction, without any clear dividing line between the two. It is possible to claim that a new way of performing femininity and young womanhood has come into being, even as older meanings are drawn upon in this construction.

## **9.2 The requirement to choose**

Much of the literature about young women today addresses how much agency young women have in engaging with various aspects of life. This thesis makes a contribution to these debates by drawing out some of the complexities in such engagements.

Discussions over whether they are best seen as dupes following societal pressures or agentically aware reflexive choosers in their own lives, are perhaps misleading because the young women themselves were found to draw on discourses emphasising the desirability of being able to take up positions as strong women able to withstand external pressures.

This thesis demonstrates that young women are very reflexive about not being seen as mindless followers of pressures, especially from the media. Reflexive distancing from being duped is a major aspect of performing young womanhood. Of course, this does not mean anyone has stepped outside discourse or social constructions around ideal young womanhood, rather, this in itself constitutes a societal demand of young women.

### **9.3 Bodies and beauty**

The analysis in Chapter 6 demonstrated that young women orient to their bodies in ambiguous ways. They often distance themselves from vulnerability to externally imposed beauty ideals, positioning themselves as strong characters in doing so, while meeting at least some of these beauty ideals some of the time. Claiming not to be affected by societal beauty standards was frequently used as an indicator of personal strength. This suggests further complications in women's engagements with beauty practices, beyond debates over their agency. Even as women were very capable of critiquing such pressures, often drawing on feminist-like arguments, there is now an added layer of complication for young women to navigate both distancing from and engaging with appearance related matters.

However, I found that the way women positioned themselves in relation to beauty ideals in this study, illustrates not so much that they had become resistant or impervious, but rather that positioning themselves as if they had, constituted one way of positioning themselves as mature wise women. That is, the impetus to present themselves as mature was very strong, and positioning themselves otherwise may have implied weakness. Certainly, a claim to imperviousness here had the function of presenting the speaker as a strong woman. This suggest, that any problems with media representations of beauty ideals are not only those negative impacts that advocates of media literacy education highlight, such as putting pressure on (young) women to be slim, pale skinned and so on. Another problem arguably is that for women to position themselves as wise and

mature in the current context, they talk about such influences as something any woman who is wise enough and mature enough can overcome. In the current context, this wisdom and maturity is also framed as something women ought to be. Being negatively influenced by media representations of beauty is associated with immaturity and a lack of wisdom. This makes it very difficult to talk about, and suggests that educating women on, the ‘falseness’ and so on of (for example) advertising will be ineffective. I suggest media literacy should attend as much to this ambiguous requirement on young women to live up to some versions of culturally sanctioned femininity while also distancing themselves from vulnerability to any such requirements.

Chapter 6 found young women often positioning themselves as critically thinking young women. However, such identity work could be troubled when the spoken argument and the appearance did not seem to cohere, such as when Participant 2 drew attention to her wearing of make-up. This chapter found that there is not one successful way of performing young womanhood, as for example an appearance that ‘works’ in one context may involve trouble in another. However, the analysis of a vlog suggested performing one kind of identity in talk, and another in appearance, may be one way of negotiating several, arguably, conflicting demands.

I want to briefly highlight some pertinent implications of these findings. As I found in this chapter, analysing young women’s orientations to bodies and media pressures surrounding beauty ideals, that the young women framed such issues in a way that suggested that negative impacts of beauty representations in the media are best overcome individually by going through a personal journey. Such framing would suggest that media literacy education would be the best way to deal with negative media influences, despite the difficulty noted above.

## **9.4 The impact of feminism**

When distancing themselves from vulnerability to beauty pressures, and taking up positions as now beyond such pressures, the participants often drew on feminist-like arguments. I have chosen to call such arguments ‘feminist-like’, rather than feminist, as it becomes a kind of feminism that adds pressures on women to live up to, and arguably lets personal issues remain personal. It is of course not up to me to define what is, and is not, feminist, but as such use of feminist-like arguments recurred across all three empirical chapters, it is an important finding. It therefore becomes very important to pay attention to what the drawing on feminist-like arguments does, rather than merely note that such arguments have now become discursive resources for young women to draw on.

## **9.5 Control, self-work and reflexivity**

In Chapter 7 I analysed the ideal characteristics of young women as they were constructed through the women’s talk. The findings in this chapter can be seen as largely supporting the argument by McRobbie (2015) that young women are called upon to be successful, but not so successful that they may become a threat to men. However, the findings allow us to go further, as they illustrate that the limits on young women pertain not only to careers but also to how loud or confident women should be. The young women’s talk demonstrates them imposing such control on themselves, and furthermore that the controlling of the self was likewise kept under control. Too much controlling of the self was constructed as harmful.

The analysis demonstrated how the speakers constructed ideals for young womanhood in their talk, and this ideal is a woman who continually works on herself; works to improve herself and keeps monitoring this work. The self is constructed as a life-long

project involving a self working on herself, and continually monitoring this work and reflecting on it.

The chapter furthermore found the speakers to have taken up a discourse that young women are entitled to well-being, which includes liking herself. This, again can be seen as a feminist-like discourse the women draw on but, again, achieving and maintaining such self-liking is constructed as a personal responsibility. When the women positioned themselves as reflexively aware of their own mental health, they commented reflexively on their own reflexive awareness, and the potential harm of, for example, overdoing criticisms of themselves for demonstrating enough desire for self-improvement.

Reflexive awareness of one's own reflexivity seems like a never-ending process, particularly as the aim of such reflexivity was constructed as a 'drive' for self-improvement. This strongly suggests that there will never be a point of just the right amount of desire to improve, without being harsh on oneself, which was constructed as an undesirable thing to do. While the young women today who are represented in these participants' talk are very reflexively aware, even being aware of their own reflexivity, too much reflexivity may also be seen as a bad thing. It suggests that there is not actually an ideal way for women to be.

## **9.6 Financial self-sufficiency**

Chapter 8 analysed women's expectations and plans for adulthood. In their talk, they very clearly constructed adulthood as involving financial self-sufficiency. Furthermore, they all talked about their lives in terms that demonstrated they drew heavily on discourses that they are personally responsible for forging their own (successful) biographies. The planned futures almost all featured careers that were spoken of as sufficiently well paid to allow financial independence. In the women's talk, this

independence was spoken of as the first marker they should achieve, after which most spoke of getting married and having children

Interestingly, for most speakers, marriage was not constructed as an alternative to financial independence. The one participant who did not construct transition to adulthood as following a progression of career, husband and then children, drew even more heavily on the independence ideal by positioning herself as being independent by choosing to be single. Breaking away from heteronormativity was here done by drawing on a discourse idealising personal independence, which is arguably another example of the individualisation expressed across the empirical chapters.

## **9.7 Children and husbands**

Furthermore, this chapter found young women talk about themselves as responsible for becoming the right kind of mother, which involves taking on the main responsibility for childrearing, as well as responsibility for choosing the right kind of man. This was a surprising finding, given that the women had otherwise drawn on feminist-like arguments. However, in one example analysed in this chapter, women's responsibility for men's behaviours could also be framed in feminist-sounding terms.

This chapter demonstrated that having good careers, financial independence, good husbands and children is very much what is constructed as a desirable future. However, as the women's talk constructs individual women as responsible for achieving this, it may be closer to having become an obligation.

## **9.8 The perfect?**

Interestingly, while much of the women's talk constructed future lives that were very similar to what McRobbie terms 'the perfect', there were examples of talk indicating that young women do not necessarily construct the futures they talk about as 'perfect'. In the example discussed above, in which one woman drew on a known figure of the

deliberately single woman, this discourse allowed her to position herself as outside normative expectations for women, but she did so by drawing on the ideal of individual independence. Furthermore, there were instances of trouble in some participants' identity work in their talk about their futures, as they indicated that there might be something different they would want, but struggled to find discursive resources to draw on in formulating what this might be.

There are arguments in youth studies (discussed in Chapter 2) that youth today may be seen as stuck in an extended adolescence, as they cannot achieve the traditional markers of adulthood. Chapter 8 challenges this with the findings that although young women have not achieved these markers, they do accept responsibility for getting them. They can thus not be seen as free from responsibilities and in that sense, cannot be described as stuck in adolescence. They may not be adults yet, but they take on responsibilities as if they were.

## **9.9 Closing thoughts, caveats and suggestions for further research**

When I started this thesis, I had hoped to recruit interview participants from various walks of life. I subsequently decide to interview only university students. While I was still able to obtain useful data, the findings presented here should be read with that in mind.

Although some of the interview participants positioned themselves very strongly as working class, it would be very interesting to research whether the narratives of increasing independence and financial self-sufficiency are drawn upon in the same way and to do the same work, among non-students, including young women not in work or education. Furthermore, research into what provides the possibilities or conditions for

the imperatives of individualisation and independence to exist, as well as the form of and conditions for any challenges to this seems pertinent. Arguably, as independence and financial self-sufficiency become harder to achieve, the imperative could have been expected to lessen, but the findings of this research suggest it has not.

Furthermore, this research found women drawing on feminist-like arguments to do non- or anti-feminist work. Arguably we are in a time of rapid changes in the availability and form of feminist arguments. As my data were collected in 2013 and 2014, there may already have been a shift in the kind of feminist arguments drawn upon, and the work they are used to perform. How feminist arguments are intertwined with individualist discourses and if, when and how, feminist arguments are used in non-individualist ways, is worth looking into now.

Lastly, I recommend further research into visual aspects performances of young womanhood, including analysis of actions and appearance. In addition, social media are an area going through rapid changes and, I would argue, increasingly constitute a site for young people's identity work. Therefore, it can be considered important to capture this aspect in future research. At the moment, YouTube is a major site, and Tumblr is arguably growing in importance, particularly for young women. Future research could fruitfully consider furthering analysis of these sites and those that are undoubtedly already emerging.



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## Appendix A. Recruitment Poster

### Are you a female student aged 18-23?

Do you want to help with research on young women's experiences?

If so, I would like to interview you for my research into 'experiences of being a young woman today'.

I am a PhD student in social psychology at The Open University. I am researching what choices young women have today, what kinds of pressures you feel you have to live up to, what you find difficult and what things you find easy.

For my research, I would like to interview 18-23 year-old female university students. Those who are interested can do either 1, 2 or 3 interviews, lasting about 1 hour each.

For the first interviews, I am looking for participants to show me around the area surrounding your place of study, to tell me about the place and the people you meet here.

The second interviews will take place over Skype and be about the kinds of pictures people post to Facebook (or similar), as well as which kinds of clothes you like and don't like.

The third interviews will be about your expectations for the future. These can take place either where we did the second interview or over Skype.

I am looking for young women of all shapes, sizes, classes, ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations, so if you are interested in doing one or more interviews, or would like some more information about my study, please contact me at:

[marie.paludan@open.ac.uk](mailto:marie.paludan@open.ac.uk) or phone/text: ~~xxxxxx xxxxxx~~

## **Appendix B. Interview Schedules**

### **First round schedule**

- **What brought you here?**

- **Sub questions:**

- Do you like being here?
- Do you feel there is pressure to live up to particular beauty standards here?
- Do you think there are different pressures here to other places?
- Are there things that are easier to do or say here, than in other places?
- Are there things that are more difficult to say or do here?

- **Do you think young women who come here tend to be very self-confident?**

- **Sub questions:**

- Do you think you act differently here to how you act elsewhere e.g at home?
- Do you talk about different things here?

- **Are particular looks better than others here?**

- **Sub questions:**

- Do you think women who come here try to look a particular way? E.g 'beautiful', confident, 'sassy'?
- How do women dress here?
- Do most women wear make-up here?
- Do other people in this place care a lot about appearance?
- Do you think there are more working class or middle class women here?

- **Does class matter here?**

- **Sub questions:**

- Do you think of yourself as a particular class?
- Do women here behave differently to how men behave?
- Are there things women can do here that men cannot?
- Are there things men can do that women cannot?

- **Can anyone be what they want to be?**

- **Sub questions:**

- Do you have close friends here?

- Do many of your friends or family attend university?
- Do you think there are particular issues affecting young women today?
- Are there issues that particularly affect women here, more than elsewhere?
- Are there issues for women elsewhere that do not affect them while they are in this location?
- What would you say are the biggest issue for you right now?
- **What is difficult/easy here?**
- **Sub questions:**
- Can anyone speak up here?
- What makes you sometimes confident to speak?
- **Do you see yourself as ‘adult’ now?**

## **Second Round Schedule**

The second round of interviews focused on issues around self-presentation in photographs and dress. I invited participants to tell me about pictures they had posted to Facebook (or similar social networking sites)

These interviews were guided by the following questions, but also included personalised follow-up questions:

- **Who is in this picture?**
- **Where are they/you?**
- **What were you/they doing when this picture was taken?**
- **Why did you choose to post this picture?**

I further asked the following questions in the first interviews for those doing only one interview, and in the second for those doing two:

- **What do you think you will be doing in 5 years' time?**
- **Do you hope or plan to have a partner or family?**
- **Will you still be friends with the friends you have now?**

## Appendix C. Information Sheet for Participants

My name is Marie Paludan. I am doing a PhD in Psychology at the Open University. For my PhD I am investigating issues that affect young women today and how young women talk about things that affect them. I am interested in what young women find difficult or easy in different areas of life, such as home, work or study.

To investigate this, I will make audio-recordings of interviews with 18-23 year-old women in different settings.

For one of the interviews, I would like to invite you to show me around the place where you work, train or study and talk about what it's like to be there, whether how people dress matters there, as well as any other topics you think matter. These interviews will last about one hour.

I will also do a round of interviews where I would like to invite you to an on-line video-chat (over Skype or similar), also lasting about an hour. These interviews will be about pictures you have posted on Facebook (if you use it). (None of these will be shared without your express permission.) I would like you to show me some shared pictures and tell me about the people and places in them. In these interviews I would also like to invite you to tell me about items from your wardrobe and tell me about what you like or don't like about them, and where you might wear them.

Interested participants will also be invited for a third interview, to talk about things that have changed in your life since the first interviews and your expectations for the future. These interviews will also last about an hour, and can take place either where we did the second interview, or over Skype. –whatever you prefer.

Anything you tell me in the interviews will be treated as confidential, and I will not use anybody's real names in my research (if I quote from your interview I will change your name and other details). The interviews will be transcribed, and the recordings and the transcripts will be archived and kept in case they are of interest for further analysis, beyond the scope of my PhD, but they too will be completely anonymous. If you mention any personal identifying information during the interview, I will delete this before sending the recording off for transcription.

You can leave the study at any time, and if at any time during or after the interviews you want to withdraw from the research, just let me know and I will delete your interview and not use your contributions.

The analysis of the interviews will become part of my PhD thesis, and I hope to publish my findings in academic journals.

If you are interested in taking part in either or both of the first interviews, please contact me to arrange a convenient time for the interview. After the first interview I will ask you if you think you will be interested in doing the second interview. If that is the case, I will contact you again after 2 months to find out if you are still interested, and if so we can arrange a convenient time for this interview. After the second interview I will ask your permission to contact you again 2 months later, to hear whether you would be interested in doing the third interview. Before each interview I will ask you to sign a consent form allowing me to use the interview material for academic purposes.

You will of course be free to change your mind at any point and will never be obliged to be interviewed.

If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to contact me.

Marie Paludan

E-mail: [marie.paludan@open.ac.uk](mailto:marie.paludan@open.ac.uk)

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## Appendix D. Consent Forms

### Consent form for participants, Campus interviews

Name of participant:

You have been invited to take part in this study of what choices young women have today, what kinds of pressures you feel you have to live up to, what you find difficult and what things you find easy in different areas of life. The study also looks into what young women would wear in different locations.

Please tick each statement to indicate you agree with it:

- I understand what is in the information sheet and have been given a copy to keep.
- I have had a chance to talk and ask questions about the research
- I know the interview will last about one hour
- I understand that any personal information I give is strictly confidential, and my name will be changed if anything I say is quoted in the research
- I understand that my personal information may be stored on a password protected computer. If this is done then it will not affect the confidentiality of this information. All such storage must comply with the 1998 Data Protection Act.
- I freely consent to be interviewed.
- I freely consent to the interview being used for academic research. I understand that any extracts used in academic publications will be anonymised.
- I understand that my anonymised interview may be archived and used for future further analyses.
- I know that I can stop taking part in the interview at any time without needing to justify my decision.
- I know that I can withdraw from the project at any time without needing to justify my decision.
- I know that if there are any problems or I have questions, I can contact

Marie Paludan

e-mail: [marie.paludan@open.ac.uk](mailto:marie.paludan@open.ac.uk)

Telephone: xxxxxx

Address: Department of Psychology

Faculty of Social Sciences

The Open University

Walton Hall

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation.

Name of participants (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed .....

Date .....

Name of researcher (BLOCK CAPITALS) .....

Signed .....

Date .....



## Consent form for participants, Skype Interviews

I the undersigned voluntarily agree to take part in the study on issues affecting young women today.

I have been given a full explanation by the investigator of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study, and of what I will be expected to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study.

I give Marie Paludan permission to view pictures I have posted to Facebook. I understand that these pictures will not be shared with anyone else.

I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers is held and processed in the strictest confidence, and in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.

I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation.

Name of volunteer (BLOCK CAPITALS) .....

Signed .....

Date .....

Name of researcher/person taking consent (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Signed .....

Date .....

## Appendix E. Vlogs

Vlogger 1, Elliesandpancakes, Manifesto Redux

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWB2kpHkP0k>

Vlogger 5, Hannah Witton, Body Image and body confidence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VXPk3ku8TAM>

Vlogger 6, Lakmini W, Too much self deprecation!

Unfortunately, this vlog has now been deleted.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC44Sgggw8LsEPOnOE5BBjIA> Accessed 1/10/2014

## Appendix F. Thanking Participants

Dear,

Thank you very much for taking part in my research.

Your contributions will be very valuable to my PhD thesis, analysing the issues affecting young women today. I will be looking at what the possibilities and constraints are for young women in Britain today, and I also hope to publish my findings in academic journals as well presenting them at conferences. I aim to finish my PhD by October 2016. Your interview will be transcribed for easier analysis, but your contributions will remain completely anonymous. If there are any sections on the tape with comments that could identify you, I will transcribe those sections myself, and only send the remainder off for transcription. If you would like a copy of the transcript of your interview, please let me know and I can send you one when they are ready.

If you have any questions or comments about the research, now or in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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Thank you very much

Marie Paludan



